



**A bit on the side: unlocking the love stories of gay men**

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
- II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
- III. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree
- IV. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree
- V. this thesis meets the *University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.*

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## ABSTRACT

A variety of stereotypes of gay men persist, among them, that fulfilling, intimate partner relationships are at best, uncommon, or at worst not feasible because of the highly-sexualised nature of relations between gay men. Research concerning intimacy among gay men has largely focused on broader public health concerns or notions of attachment to, or withdrawal from, a homogenous gay community. Love has rarely featured as an important part of this whole story. In fact, love stories themselves, as a way of exploring broader sociological concerns, have been largely ignored.

This thesis attends to the love stories of gay men as a way of examining how intimate partner relationships in many ways inform us in theoretical debates about sexuality, identity and belonging. The relationship between the arts and sociology is also studied, suggestive of insights that may be gained from the application of fictive and non-fictive texts to these theoretical debates. Data collected over ten years from repeat interviews with ten gay men reveal various elements of their love stories - the changing forms of these stories (Plummer, 1995), both for the participants and society more broadly, a key feature. Participants spoke of how dangerous emotionally the 'scene' can be and of the importance of a plurality of understanding of intimacy and of their feelings of what their relationships must be in order for them to feel that they match their needs.

The theoretical backdrop includes an examination of Susan Sontag's (1989) look at love in a time of AIDS, the concept of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991; 1992), critiques of this concept (Jamieson, 1999), narratives around individualisation and love (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) and the use of fictional texts to illuminate the highly-desired, yet often foregone, feeling of love (Evans, 2003).

The connection between these sociological debates and the narratives of the participants was aided by the use of a stimulus text,  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995), an Australian autobiography to which many gay men, not only Australian, may relate. The stimulus text opened up connections between the broader sociological narratives, narratives around individualisation, love, trust, faithfulness and commitment and the narratives of the participants. The love stories of the participants featured prominently, not in the stereotypically-depicted way, in how they made sense of society, impelled by feelings of trust and commitment.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction



The location is a restaurant in a large cosmopolitan city in a highly-modernised country. Two men, who are intimate partners, attend a social gathering to celebrate the work of one of the man's work colleagues. Another of his colleagues – someone he likes, despite their nascent relationship – asks the question seemingly the first ever asked of same-sex couples: 'how long have you two been together?' The man replies, 'Just over ten years.' His work colleague, who herself has been married to the same person for many years, develops an expression of both perplexity and surprise. There is a short pause before she says, 'Golly, that is longer than some couples!'

I am uncertain about what troubled me most about that exchange. Was it that my partner and I were not viewed as 'most couples,' or was it that my colleague thought it acceptable to pass comment on the longevity, and potentially the quality, of my intimate relationships? I suspect that she stumbled into that position by saying the first thing that occurred to her, but does it suggest the existence of a far more egregious issue? It is possibly true that our relationship is not like 'most couples.' 'Most couples' comprise a man and a woman. A broader narrative that my colleague had expressed, probably unwittingly, however, was that typical gay male intimate relationships are unstable and evanescent. By implication, the love stories of gay men are characterised by narratives that are transitory and lacking depth and meaning. Here then is the central problem: how has this broader narrative persisted into the 21st century, despite, or possibly in part because of, all of the work undertaken by the warriors of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s?

This thesis seeks to examine the love stories of a group of gay men in a highly-modernised society and the influences several fictional and auto/biographical texts may have had on how these stories have developed. Using Anthony Giddens' expression of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991), this thesis aims to illustrate the ways in which gay men experience deep and meaningful love stories and the ways in which these

stories affect, and are affected by, social processes. Among these stories are narratives of individualisation and intimacy, exaltation and hardship. Perhaps most importantly, however, these are expression of love consistent with the more-commonly understood love narratives of 'most couples.'

During the late 1960s and 1970s the issue of the criminality of homosexuality began to be questioned in Australia. While in Britain and America, challenges to this status were initiated by 'a classical middle-class single-issue pressure group of a type which flourished in the 1960s' (Weeks, 1977: 171), in Australia mobilisation around reform occurred in such collectives as the Humanists' Societies of New South Wales and Victoria (Wotherspoon, 1991). Perhaps at odds with expectations, other institutions key to germinating reform were Christian churches, such as the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales, which in 1967 declared that homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should be decriminalised (Wotherspoon, 1991). Despite the persistence of the criminalisation of male homosexual acts in New South Wales until 1984, alongside the law reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s ran a narrative of sexual liberation and with this, the liberation to express love. Dennis Altman, after describing the 1970s as a unique period in history in which to be homosexual, evocatively implores us to consider the meaning of liberation:

...ultimately any vision of liberation is one that sees us breaking out of the quite unnecessary narrow limits on the human potential that exists within our society, that recognises that human beings can be much more than we have allowed ourselves to be, that recognises that humans have a right to diversity...And that we needn't and shouldn't be imprisoned by antiquated ideas of what is natural and what is normal. (Altman, 1979: 20-21)

One of the most striking communal expressions of this vision of liberation within this era was the first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on the 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1978. While fifty-three people were arrested at the inaugural parade, the protest led to the repeal of legislation in New South Wales prohibiting such demonstrations. The fundamental difference of the experience of being homosexual in the 1970's was that 'a homosexual



identity was widely recognised, and to some extent accepted in Western societies through a process of co-option into consumer capitalism' (Altman, 1979: 15).

In 1984, homosexual acts between consenting adult males were decriminalised in New South Wales. In the same year, a flourish of epidemiological literature began describing connections between Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). One study suggested, for example, that one of the family of human T-lymphotropic retroviruses (HTLV-III) may be the primary cause of AIDS (Gallo et al., 1984). Another study suggested that a condition that occurs frequently in the latency period of HIV/AIDS was particularly common among homosexual males (Dalglish et al., 1984). Alongside these somewhat deterministic accounts of the disease, other narratives were developing. In 1984, the AIDS Action Committee became the AIDS Council of New South Wales (now ACON), a service designed to assist gay men who had HIV/AIDS (now all people who have the disease). Despite the ascription of HIV/AIDS, at the disease's peak, exclusively to gay men, the disease wrought unexpected consequences in New South Wales, and more specifically Sydney, where its concentration was highest:

Indeed, in the long run it furthered the process of creating cohesiveness within the gay community itself, while in the wider community it has engendered further social change in the direction of greater acceptance of homosexual and gay men in Australian society. (Wotherspoon, 1991: 230)

Similarly, by the late 1980s, authors such as Susan Sontag (1989) sought to promote a more humane and less deterministic narrative around HIV/AIDS, and to illustrate its human costs. This narrative was lauded by some in medical circles as an attempt,

...to change the way people think about AIDS and to free both AIDS patients and a population irrationally frightened by AIDS from the spell of emotionally and ethically charged meanings that add unnecessarily to the suffering of AIDS patients. (Levin, 1989: 837)

By the early 1990s, different understandings of sexual citizenship were being discussed both in Australia and in the United Kingdom. Simon Watney (1991), for example, theorised about the retrogressive possibilities of a 1998 Act of Parliament that prohibited the 'promotion' of a homosexual lifestyle to school children:

The discourse of 'promotion' therefore aims to saturate the image of 'the homosexual' with the traditional connotations of depraved sexual acts, and to prevent the cultural acceptability of gay identity, and sexual diversity rooted in the principle of sexual choice. (Watney, 1991: 404)

At the same time, however, conceptualisations of same-sex relationships in high-modernity narrated love and intimacy in context of the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991) as key characteristics, especially in the face of discourses which sought to minimise these elements. In contrast to the anonymous 'short-term, depersonalised liaisons' (Giddens, 1992: 145) that characterised the pre-HIV/AIDS bath-house culture of the 1960s and 70s, Giddens describes a new relationship, suffused with the promise of intimacy. In his presentation of the 'pure relationship', a relationship often characterised by same-sex relationships, Anthony Giddens suggests that, despite more commonly accepted portrayals, commitment and love may abound:

Commitment, within the pure relationship, is essentially what replaces the external anchors that close personal connections used to have in pre-modern situations. Love, in the sense of contemporary romantic love, is a form of commitment, but commitment is the wider of the two. (Giddens, 1991: 92)

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the concept of the 'sexual citizen' was deployed to describe the emergence of an 'intermingling of the personal and the public' (Weeks, 1998: 36), at least as far as sexuality goes. Jeffrey Weeks illustrates this intermingling by pointing to the fact that even in the late 1960s few, if any, would have described themselves as 'queer' or 'transgender' or 'anything like that as a defining characteristic of personhood and of social involvement and of presence' (Weeks, 1998: 36).

In the thirty or so years between the instigation of law reform around homosexual acts and the emergence of the concept of the 'sexual citizen', profound transformations in intimacy and representation of love between gay men in intimate partnerships have occurred, yet it seems that a narrative persists excluding gay men from traditional love stories. Reflecting upon fictional and auto/biographical texts from eras of elemental social change, this thesis explores the ways in which concepts of faithfulness are narrated by the participants in this study. The love stories of the men whom I interviewed are expressed in the context of their perceptions of social change evinced in three fictional and auto/biographical texts.

Among the slowly-changing attitudes to love and sex between gay men in intimate partnerships in the 1960s and '70s, the love story between Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist in Annie Proulx's (2006) *Brokeback Mountain* emerges. The two men meet by chance in Wyoming, as ranch hands, but over the course of the next twenty years, develop a loving, intimate relationship that endures despite both being married. Their relationship only ends when Jack dies, most likely the result of an attack, although purported to be an 'accident' with a tyre iron. In many ways, Ennis and Jack's relationship illustrates the difficulties experienced in openly expressing their love in the period in which their relationship developed. In Melbourne, Australia, in a similar time, Tim Conigrave and John Caleo meet at a Catholic secondary school. Their love story is not, however, fictional. Like Ennis and Jack, over the ensuing twenty years, their relationship develops – they are sometimes together and at others, they have different partners – until John dies from AIDS-related illnesses in the early 1990s. This true story emerged at a time when HIV/AIDS was little understood, and goes some way in presenting the human side of an otherwise epidemiologically-represented tragedy. *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) is a collection of sixteen short stories charting the experiences of fictional and non-fictional protagonists commencing in the mid-1990s. Some characters are gay men who form a type of autobiographical representation. Quan (2001) sympathetically narrates their experiences of sex, love and loss in the context of a post-HIV/AIDS panic.

At the time of the infancy of this thesis, in 2006 and 2007, HIV/AIDS infections among gay men had been steadily increasing for the past decade (Grulich & Kaldor, 2008),

recreational drug use was a consistent theme in the mediation of relationships between gay men (Dowsett, Wain & Keys, 2005). Notions of a unifying 'gay community' were being questioned by gay men of all ages (Dowsett, et al., 2005), although the first questioning of this notion finds its origins at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Against this backdrop, ten men who identified as gay, aged between twenty-six and forty-eight, were interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

As a qualitative study, the small sample size was not unusual. Qualitative studies often have small samples, relying much more on the individual narratives to illuminate features of our social world. Small scale studies such as this have previously elucidated issues for a minority (Lupton & Seymour, 2000) and have been used to scrutinise the dynamics of social situations (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006), even when there are two participants (Game, 1989).

The interviews sought, through induction and analysis, to conceptualise features of the social world and make an account of the possible reasons these features are as they are (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The interview process had two parts. The first interview explored the participants' views on intimacy and intimate partnerships more generally. Participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of the shape of intimate gay-male partnerships over the past thirty or so years. Participants were asked to consider their concepts of faithfulness as embodied in their own, as well as others', experiences of intimate partnerships among gay men.

The second part of the interview process involved asking the participants if they had read Tim Conigrave's (1995) *Holding the Man*. If the participants had read the book, a second interview was undertaken with a focus on the ways in which, if at all, the individual participant's own narratives of love and intimacy paralleled those of the two protagonists, Tim and John. If the participant had not read the book they were given the book and asked to read it, after which the second interview was undertaken. *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) was chosen as the 'set text' as it was theorised that many parallels would be drawn between the narratives of the participants and the experiences of Tim and John as they are narrated in the book. There is also an element of contemporaneity and synchronicity related to the issues arising for gay men in the

era of text and how they are therefore reflected in the cultural texts of the time. Narratives around love, sex, disappointment and pain were derived in some measure by the participants' 'self-implication' (Kuiken, Miall & Sikora, 2004: 171) in the text, that is, the generation of 'blurred boundaries between oneself and the narrator of the text' (Kuiken et al., 2004: 171).

Borrowing from the sociology of friendship, 'visible similarities' (van Duijn et al., 2003: 160) between the participants and the protagonists in the book elicited narratives around intimacy and conceptions of faithfulness. One way of thinking about how these narratives parallel is the 'mirror view' of friendship. Despite some questions around the 'mirror view' of friendship and its capacity to 'identify features that are in part constitutive of close or companion friendship ...[and are] significant and distinctive about the ways in which friendship has an impact upon the self' (Cocking & Kennett, 1998: 503). Nonetheless, in the responses of the participants it may be seen, as Aristotle suggested, that knowledge about oneself is often gained by looking at one's friends (Barnes, 1984), in this instance, played by proxy by the characters in the texts.

It is perhaps no surprise that the participants found strong resonance between the experiences of the protagonists in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995) and their own experiences. The 'self-implication' and 'blurred boundaries' (Kuiken et al., 2004: 171) that often characterise a reading of an /biographical text work in combination with the assimilation of sociological processes as expressed in fiction (Penfold-Mounce, Beer & Burrows, 2011), in  *Brokeback Mountain*  (Proulx, 2006), for example. Participants drew parallels between their own experiences of love and sexual connectedness. All participants reported difficulties experienced as young men negotiating sexual-identity. One participant, Phillip, for example, related the story of falling in love with a fellow boarding school student as a sixteen-year-old and the sadness and loss experienced when, after discovering their relationship, the other student's parents sent their son to a boarding school in Europe. This narrative was conveyed with a deep sense of poignancy. Another participant, drew parallels between his own experience and that of Tim and John in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995), in which their respective parents forbid them from seeing one another. Another participant narrated his experience of the inaugural Mardi Gras and how as a sixteen-year-old, despite the violence and

brutality of the state apparatus, he felt a sense of belonging and oneness with a community. This narrative was aligned by this participant with Tim's activism and belonging when he first goes to university.

Participants were also asked how they perceived the shape of contemporary gay male intimate relationships, especially in reference to perceptions of faithfulness. One participant expressed a certain ruefulness about the contours of contemporary intimate relationships between gay men, in doing so, pointing to a lack of coherence and a degree of fragmentation of the 'gay community.' Whereas, another participant expressed great hope for the discovery and maintenance of intimacy, and sexual monogamy. He drew parallels to John's experiences of Tim's 'straying,' a terminology that was prevalent in all of the participants' narratives. Another participant narrated trust as the most important feature of a concept of faithfulness in the absence of sexual monogamy. All participants narrated a sense that love is the unifying element of intimate relationships among gay men in whichever shape these relationships take. One participant, for example, narrated with considerable conviction, his own feelings about the love John must have borne for Tim, and how this must have been the adhesive that kept them together for so many years. He related this to his own experience in which a partner, whom he had loved, disappointed him by having sex with another man – just as John questioned Tim's behaviour in that regard, and asked Tim, 'But I just don't understand why you would want to?' Despite heterogeneity among the narratives of the participants regarding the shape of contemporary intimate relationships among gay men, trust and love and faithfulness emerged as key unifying concepts.

The narratives of the participants in this study echo, in many ways, Giddens' (1991) ascription of the 'pure relationship'. Trust, as narrated by the participants, was a key element of maintaining intimacy. In their narratives, trust was not assumed – it is a matter of negotiating aspects of the relationship. As with other aspects of the 'pure relationship', trust needs to be worked at (Giddens, 1991: 96). It is this mutual trust Giddens identifies as being closely related to the achievement of intimacy (1991: 96).

Love too was narrated as elemental to intimate relationships among gay men. Love was not perceived by any of the participants to be beyond reach, despite their individual

relationship statuses. This narrative resonates with the way in which love and sexuality are described in the 'pure relationship': where once love was enshrined for straight couples in the institution of marriage, now love and sexuality are more connected through the pure relationship. As one participant described, love and sex may not necessarily always be connected, but love must form a key element of the relationship. Similarly, Giddens (1992) describes a situation in which 'confluent love', the love characterising 'pure relationships', emerges from the vestiges of former understandings of sexual behaviour within intimate relationships. He suggests that 'confluent love' does not resemble romantic love in so far as there is no prescription within 'confluent love' for sexual exclusivity. Rather, sexual exclusivity is something for the partners to decide (Giddens, 1992: 63).

The shape and functioning of intimate relationships among gay men have been the subject of sociological investigation under various banners. In the 1950s, for example, Lesnoff and Westley (1956), referring to both gays and lesbians, 'described a socially isolated 'homosexual community' whose identification with 'constituent social groups' ultimately derived from shared sexual preferences' (Wilkinson et al., 2012: 1162). That this description appeared in the journal *Social Problems* in the 1950's is probably indicative of the worldview commonly held by many researchers of the era, yet it is in many ways reflected in more recent characterisations of the 'gay community' in 'surprisingly similar and collectivizing terms' (Wilkinson et al., 2012: 1162). In the end, this understanding of the intimate relationships of gay men points to a social group whose stories of love and intimacy are more or less inscribed within their sexual experiences and preferences. Where then, in this analysis, does a sociology of love, if at all, fit?

Among the sociological literature, little has been written about the love stories of gay men in the context of the significance of these stories for their own sake. Typically, love stories among gay men emerge as secondary to inquiry of narratives around HIV/AIDS, public health and sexual behaviours. This thesis aims to add some balance to this rather narrow view of the way gay men experience love and intimate relationships throughout the life-course. I do not think it reasonable to assume, as perhaps my colleague did in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, that intimate relationships among gay men

are necessarily fleeting, characterised by an absence of love. I think it is reasonable to assume that, for some gay men, their intimate loving relationships may have similar characteristics to the relationship between John and Tim in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995), and that between Ennis and Jack in  *Brokeback Mountain*  (Proulx, 2006). While these intimate relationships did not necessarily bear the trappings of more traditional relationships, nor were they devoid of love. Similarly, the participants in this study narrated stories of love, acutely felt, among stories of loss and sadness associated with their own intimate relationships.

The sociological literature emerging contemporaneously with all of these love stories is examined and provides context for the experiences of the fictional and auto/biographical narratives. The literature from the 1950s and 60s, for example, suggesting that homosexuals were an isolated group for whom sexual proclivities were the defining, unifying feature, providing the backdrop for the experiences of the characters in  *Brokeback Mountain*  (Proulx, 2006). The narratives of these characters form a kind of ethnography, alongside which the socially-constructed nature of sexuality began to be explored (Wilkinson et al., 2012). Similarly, the emergence of ideas of a new gay 'community' (Altman, 1982: 35), provides context for the experiences of the characters in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995), especially as the spectre of AIDS grew ever larger in the 1980s. Theories of increasing individualisation and the transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 1991; 1992), including the process by which, 'Love is becoming a blank that the lovers must fill in themselves across the widening trenches of biography...' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 5), frame the experiences of many of the characters in  *Calendar Boy*  (2001). Further, the narratives of some of the participants in the present study reflect that, 'In a world of plastic sexuality and pure relationships, however, monogamy has to be reworked in the context of commitment and trust' (Giddens, 1992: 146).

This reworking of monogamy among gay men was a central feature in the narratives of the participants in this study. Often monogamy was described as a negotiable instrument of trust – not a defining feature of loving relationships – but elemental to mutual respect and trust when removed from the relationship. One participant in particular said that knowing where one stood in relation to monogamy was the key



feature of trust in an intimate relationship. At the same time, he narrated extra-intimate partner sex as no impediment to love. Many of the narratives of the participants echoed this theme, not presented as a *carte blanche* for sexual voracity with many partners, but more as monogamy not necessarily being a constituent part of loving intimate relationships. Trust was the key feature, suggesting, 'Monogamy refers, not to the relationship itself, but to sexual exclusiveness as a criterion of trust: 'fidelity' has no meaning except as an aspect of that integrity which trust in the other presumes' (Giddens, 1992: 146).

This thesis therefore contends that, despite narratives from fictional and auto/biographical literature, sociological literature has in large part precluded the love stories of gay men, outside of the context of HIV/AIDS management and prevention, and sexual behaviours. Further, this thesis points to the importance of these love stories, both as they exist in the fictional and auto/biographical literature and as they may exist in the sociological literature, in understanding how gay men understand and narrate intimacy, love, desire and their impact upon the transformation of intimacy and individualisation in late modernity. Finally, this thesis aims to ascribe to intimate gay male relationships the same importance of love, caring and intimacy as to the conception of 'most couples.'

The mid-1990s was a time of upheaval for many of us. It was a time when I and many of my contemporaries were coming-out. It was also a time when theories of modernity had crescendoed – ideas around the new place of love and intimacy in a 'disembedded' society (Giddens, 1991) were being debated. Finally, the shackles of past prejudice about gay folk were being thrown off as changes in law in many jurisdictions sought to redress past harms. Traditional models of intimacy were being questioned in the newly free (or freer) zone of sexual story telling (Plummer, 1995). Love, or falling in love, sparked debates about the commodified and commercialised romance story (Evans, 1998). At the same time, a little auto/biography was penned and published here in Australia. *Holding the Man*, by Tim Conigrave (1995), took up many of these concerns: what it meant to love under difficult social conditions, how intimacy was negotiated in the absence of clear instructions, and how one goes about telling their story in an authentic way. Along with the sociological theory of the time, this auto/biography, and

other contemporaneous cultural texts, form the backbone of the theory engaged in this thesis. Chapter two reviews the literature of the time, plotting a path through understandings of faithfulness, intimacy and love among gay men as the millennium approaches (Kushner, 2013).

The humanities have much to tell us about sociological studies of human interaction. Mary Evans (1998; 2003) uses, for example, English-language novels to elucidate sociological theory around the meanings ascribed to romance and love. Steven Seidman (2004) used a study of film from the latter half of the twentieth century to further understand the concept of the 'closet' and the emotional and social burden 'passing' may accumulate. He shows how 'a sense of self and social belonging is fashioned under such circumstances' (Seidman, 2004: 7). In chapter three of this thesis, similar attention is given to the ways in which cultural texts, fictive and auto/biographical, provide a backdrop, both for the depiction of a particular Zeitgeist, as well as providing participants with a springboard into their own experiences. The stories of the participants are curated as an anthology of auto/biographies, informed by the cultural texts and reflected upon within the context of sociological theory around the meanings of sex, intimacy and love for gay men in late modernity.

Chapter four examines more closely the narratives in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995),  *Brokeback Mountain*  (Proulx, 2006) and  *Calendar Boy*  (2001). In all three texts live stories of intimacy and love, alongside stories of disappointment, rejection and exclusion. These stories are explored as an entry point to the sociological narratives around the significance of intimate relationships in the process of self-realisation. The 'closet' is discussed as a means of self-protection on one hand and of self-denial on the other. The secrecy of the 'sex part' is analysed with its double-edge for intimacy. Sex as a mode of communication appears in these three texts, paralleled by longing over many years for the intimate other, the person with whom the characters felt 'at home.' Love is introduced as a way of understanding what kept these characters in the texts tied to one another for so many years and through so much hardship. These stories provide the setting for analysing the participants' narratives around sex, intimacy and love.

The participants in the study spoke about their experiences on the gay 'scene.' Often these stories included detail of how emotionally damaging 'the scene' could be – one participant described for example, looking for intimacy in many 'nooks and crannies' and coming up with very little. Other participants spoke about the 'soulless' nature of the perpetual search for sexual conquest. Chapter five introduces the participants and their stories. These narratives focus on the 'dangerous' nature of 'the scene,' the search for and elusiveness of, intimacy. In the narratives of the participants, one way of reconciling this seemingly contradictory relationship between sex and intimacy was love. Participants drew in their experiences of less conventional couples to illustrate how love and an ethic of care provided a worthy foundation for fulfilling, intimate relationships. The participants stories were full of examples where this had been the case, and had influenced their own feelings around models of intimacy.

The participants of course had their own love stories. Chapter six looks more closely at the individual love stories of the participants, and how they used these to understand the world. Auto/biography is one way of securing a sense of self (Giddens, 1991). The love stories of the participants go a long way to producing an auto/biography of sorts, and in telling these stories, the participants added to the world of stories, potentially engendering other stories (Plummer, 1995). In turn, the participants had looked to the narratives in the set-text,  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995), to make sense of their own experiences. This underscores the utility of the humanities in illuminating sociological narratives, the narratives of the participants so closely echoing the narratives in the set-text. Far beyond a simple relatability, the narratives of the participants interwove with those of the set-text, implicating the text in the construction of these men's auto/biographies.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The intricacies of gay men's intimacies



#### The social and theoretical landscape

Sociological examination may be gainfully augmented by examining fictional and auto/biographical works of the same time (Altman, 1979). This may be especially important in examining the 'stories' (Plummer, 1995) around homosexuality and gay men as they change over time. By the turn of the millennium, sociologists honed-in on different, new ways of thinking about these stories (Richardson, 2004; Warner, 1999a; Weeks, 1998) by analysing how movements for equality were increasingly based upon arguments for good, gay citizenship, that is, gays were just like every other citizen and should therefore be treated as such. This equal treatment included equal access to assisted and funded reproduction and adoption services and of course, marriage. At the same time, with greater knowledge about HIV and AIDS, different narratives around the virus and the disease began to emerge (Shernoff, 2005), departing from the late 20th Century messages about partner reduction as a way of curtailing the spread of the virus. Not to be conflated with monogamy, in this context questions about faithfulness and romantic love may arise along with how concepts such as the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992) might be examined in relation to these ordinary, everyday relationships. Locating these changing 'stories' (Plummer, 1995) alongside cultural texts of the time may go some way to illuminating the love stories of gay men.

During the 1950s and 1960s gay men were largely invisible in the Australian context. Laws at both state and federal levels of government proscribed sexual acts between consenting adult males, and apart from 'pulp fiction,' a largely US phenomenon, there were scant, if any, representations of gays in popular culture (Young, 2001). As such, gays were cast as an 'outsider' group (Simmel, [1908]1950), people who have no specific relation to the broader group, suffering more 'because they were damned to

silence and invisibility than because of an open, aggressive homophobic culture' (Seidman, 2004: 163). Gays were systematically excluded from citizenship through a complex framework of state intervention and moral censure against a perceived social danger (Eskridge, 1999).

As the body of mainstream literature exploring issues around sexual diversity grew in the 1970s, new ideas around gay identity politics and expression emerged in commercial production, with many authors using these channels for activism and for gay visibility (Distelberg, 2010). In the US, this visibility was considerably propelled by the Stonewall Riots of 1969, and although these may not signify the nascence of gay liberation, in many ways they represent an achievement of it (Armstrong & Crage, 2006). Similarly, here in Australia, the first Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on that cold June night in 1978 has come to symbolise a welcome visibility of sexual diversity. Although as some theorists would argue, this visibility cannot be conflated with social progress per se (Markwell, 2002).

As the violence of 1978 ebbed slowly away, and as sex acts between consenting adult males were decriminalised in 1984 in New South Wales (as late as 1994 in other Australian jurisdictions), so were we confronted with the spectre of HIV/AIDS. Simon Watney (1987) suggested at the time that the media of the developed world attributed the 'blame' for HIV/AIDS squarely to gay men (and, I would argue, injection drug users) – the predominating representation at the time was of HIV/AIDS as a gay man's disease (Blendon & Donelan, 1988). Additionally, theorists at the time reported that the discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS had its foundation in discrimination against homosexuals more generally (Herek & Glunt, 1988). There is also considerable evidence at the time to suggest that HIV/AIDS is just a 'convenient hook' on which to hang all sorts of prejudice against outgroups (Royse & Birge, 1987).

Advances in understanding the science of HIV/AIDS and its transmission led during the 1990s to campaigns aimed at reducing stigma associated with the virus. How then, were we to think about this virus, given the subgroup it seemingly targeted? By September 1992, during the previous twelve months, 82.1 per cent of new infections were transmissions of one gay male to another (Noble, Kippax & Crawford 1995). Noble

and colleagues, describe the indiscriminate association of AIDS and homosexuality as a 'conceptual economy' (1995: 320), yet one that persists as a stigmatising force today (Altman et al., 2012; William et al., 2015). Against this backdrop emerged new theoretical approaches to intimate relationships; approaches in which love featured above all as an anchoring mechanism (Giddens, 1991) in a world where negotiation of risks was elemental to survival (Beck, 1992). Although gay men had been negotiating the risks of making their sexual identity public, by for example, engaging in public bathroom and tearoom sex (Humphreys, 1970), and enduring exclusion from full citizenship for many years, it was now perhaps the time to negotiate, publicly and privately, how they were to engage with more traditional narratives of love and intimacy, even as the institutions which had formerly safe-guarded this began to crumble.

By the early years of the new millennium, gay men's courtship, 'lifestyle' and sexuality practices had poured into mainstream popular culture in the UK, Australia and other similar societies. *Queer as Folk*, for example, a TV series that unabashedly documented the lives of a group of friends in Manchester, UK – their partying, drug-taking, sexual adventures, as well as the other intricacies of their lives, including surrogate fatherhood, coming out and the importance of friendship. *Will and Grace*, a US series of similar vintage, also portrayed the importance of friendship, providing a positive view of the relationships of the central characters. At the same time, sociologists began to use the metaphor of the 'sexual citizen' (Weeks, 1998) to analyse how on the one hand, moments of 'transgression' (Weeks, 1998: 37) were required to challenge the status quo, and on the other, these moments were about the 'paradoxical' move to protect 'the possibilities of private life and private choice in a more inclusive society' (Weeks, 1998:37). Much like in the TV series, sexuality at once took centre stage, but also provided some protections in the private sphere, that is, shared experiences and confidences for example.

In his study of 50 films of the last half of the 20th Century, Steven Seidman observed changes in the representations of homosexuality towards the end of the century, in which 'gays step forward as 'normal' human beings' (Seidman, 2004: 14). Seidman problematises the idea of 'normal' suggesting that this archetype of 'sexual citizen'

excludes non-normal looking, aspiring, working gays from social integration (Seidman, 2004: 14). Similarly, Michael Warner analyses the 'trouble with normal' (Warner, 1999a), identifying scripts of heterosexual desire and romance as being thought of as 'the core of humanity' (Warner, 1999a: 47), with the accompanying values being 'the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests' (Warner, 1999a: 47). When society is confronted with contexts of homosexual romance and love, this may represent an assault on these values, especially as they may not conform to notions of the good gay or lesbian citizen (Richardson, 2004). As Diane Richardson observes, it is precisely because homosexuality has a history of being represented as an inferior, reviled 'other' (Richardson, 2004: 393; Terry, 1999) that some gay men and women have focused upon equal rights, rather than 'toppling the majority' (Seidman, 2004: 175). It is within these contexts that this thesis seeks to add to debates around the importance of intimate, loving relationships among gay men – the love stories of gay men – and how they may counter these representations of the inferior 'other.'

### **Representations of Sexuality**

Representations of gay men as sex-obsessed sexual libertines have persisted from at least the 1970s. In *Faggots*, for example, Larry Kramer (2000) chronicles the sexual exploits, often impelled by drug and alcohol use, of a group of gay men in New York before the AIDS crisis. In this quasi-auto/biographical novel, Kramer (2000) laments his own incapacity to form the long-lasting, intimate, loving relationship that he so craves. Susan Sontag described the same period as the 'apogee' (1989: 76) of sexual libertinism among gay men, a time at which,

many male homosexuals reconstituted themselves as something like an ethnic group, one whose distinctive folkloric custom was sexual voracity, and the institutions of urban homosexual life became a sexual delivery system of unprecedented speed, efficiency and volume. (Sontag, 1989: 76)

Then along came AIDS. As Sontag recognises, in 1989, AIDS was a disease that was 'not yet fully understood, as well as extremely recalcitrant to treatment' (Sontag, 1989: 16). Sontag uses metaphors of several kinds to great effect in highlighting how prevailing narratives of the time, bound up in the 'very working of the economic system' (1989:

77), urged people to 'defy limits' (1989: 77), in the pursuit of individual freedom and fulfilment. While conceding that 'recreational, risk-free sexuality' (Sontag, 1989: 77) was hardly the invention of gay men, nonetheless the arrival of AIDS seems to have altered the direction of that particular narrative around unbounded sexual expression. Sidling up next to this story, Sontag suggests, is the development of a questioning of the libertinism of the 1970s – a turn perhaps toward more conservative approaches – a 'rediscovery of tonal music, Bouguereau, a career in investment banking, and church weddings' (1989: 79). The point here is that, as a reaction to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, at least in Sontag's analysis, many of the (risky) ideals of modernity, especially related to risk-free sexual expression, began to be questioned, as the metaphor of a rediscovery of tonal music suggests.

Two further points need to be made here. The first is that, even in the thirty or so years since the arrival of AIDS, the stereotype of gay men so comprehensively magnified in Kramer's (2000) work, stubbornly persists, or at the very least, overshadows other, more 'ordinary' notions of the lives and relationships of gay men. The second point is that an epidemiological focus in research on gay men and their sexual behaviour, which undeniably has saved many thousands of lives, has failed to account for the many varied, intimate, friendly and loving relationships that gay men have, which may or indeed may not, conform to the patterns of what might be called gay community (Wilkinson et al., 2012). By looking at broader debates about sex, intimacy, love and faithfulness we can see through the chicanery of this stereotype.

### **The intricacies of Intimacy**

Thus far in this chapter, the narrative surrounding the intimate relationships of gay men is that these are highly sexualised. However, the majority of gay men do in fact seek intimacy as well as sex, with most wanting sexual relationships that are not transient (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Jamieson, 1998; Weston, 1991). Research also suggests that sex and sociability may often overlap, and that sex is not necessarily as primary a motivation for gay men's relationship histories (Wilkinson et al., 2012) as some other theorists have suggested. The literature around intimacy points to several models. One model suggests that intimacy is derived from the meeting of two autonomous individuals, whose common interests draw them together, and the



relationship is sustained through trust and mutual disclosure (Giddens, 1991; 1992). Another suggests that in fact the process of developing intimacy is not so democratic and can hinge on all sorts of inequalities both within the relationship and in society more broadly, questioning whether disclosing intimacy is actually the 'key organizing principle of personal life' (Jamieson, 1998: 2). Yet another approach suggests that we need to decentre heteronormative visions of family intimacy in order to better understand 'non-standard intimacies' (Berlant & Warner, 2000; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004).

One hallmark version of looking at intimacy is Giddens' (1991) 'pure relationship': a type of intimate relationship that is based in equality and commitment. In such a relationship, all of the pressures to conform to one or another model of relationship have disintegrated, and have been transformed into a "communicative code" rather than a phenomenon integrated with the wider exigencies of human existence' (Giddens, 1991: 164). Implicit too in Giddens' (1991) representation of the 'pure relationship' is that such a relationship continues on a mutually beneficial trajectory until one or both of the parties decide there is no more benefit to be gained from the relationship. Thus, 'a pure relationship is one in which the external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver' (Giddens, 1991: 6). Clearly this is an 'ideal type'— a relationship in which none of the day-to-day realities of sociation exist (Jamieson, 1998). Nonetheless, there is great promise here for thinking about how intimate relationships may develop under conditions of greater equality and inclusiveness.

In Giddens' analysis, intimacy is viewed as a core element, though not definitive, of the 'pure relationship'. This partly explains the relationship between sex and intimacy for gay men. In his discussion of bath-house culture, Giddens (1992: 147) looks at a divorce of sex and intimacy by singling-out the more anonymous sex for special attention. Jamieson similarly suggests that it is gay men's 'frequent ability to separate intimacy and sex' (1998: 127) that explains how men in stable partnerships visit these scenes without threatening this partnership.

In the literature on intimacy, the idea of the 'pure relationship' and the convenient divorce of sex and intimacy for gay men has been critiqued in several ways. We will attend to the critiques of the 'pure relationship' first. A primary critique suggests that while the 'rejection of the more pessimistic account of personal life at the century's end' (Jamieson, 1999: 491) is warranted, the day-to-day struggles of life cannot be ignored and will, at some point, infuse even the most equal relationships: 'when adults share responsibility for physical space, money and material things, how these are managed cannot, but become both symbolic of and reflexively constitutive of the relationship itself' (Jamieson, 1999: 490). Struggles over resources can mean trouble for intimate relationships, for as Mary Evans has suggested, using an old folk adage, 'When poverty comes knocking, love flies out of the window' (Evans, 2003: 51). The 'pure relationship' may not therefore represent the majority of intimate relationships, that is: 'it is perfectly possible that widely disseminated ideals are, nevertheless, not widely or radically experienced lived realities of the present' (Jamieson, 1999: 490). This may of course be a reality for gay couples as much as straight couples. Gay men and lesbians may prioritise equality in their relationships, but just what constitutes equality is contested (Weston, 1991). Other critiques include Giddens' (1992) overdependence on the tenets and practices of psychoanalysis, without providing a more thoroughgoing sociological account of how transformations of intimacy may contribute to transformations at the broader societal level (Jamieson, 1999).

In addition, if the core element of the 'pure relationship' is 'mutual self-disclosure' (Giddens, 1991: 6), then it is certainly understandable that such relationships are fragile. Research suggests that gay men do engage in 'more expressive and intimate modes of relating' (Nardi, 1999: 46) which challenge the usual script about masculinity (Wilkinson et al., 2012: 1173). While Jennifer Wilkinson and colleagues are here writing about gay men's friendships and personal communities, it may be that this more expressive intimacy translates into gay men's partnership relationships (Connell, 1992). This mode of self-disclosure challenges stereotypes about masculinity and control, but is elemental to intimacy and knowing the other. Friendships demonstrate how this level of intimacy develops. Dwight Fee (2000) shows, for example, that friendships between straight and gay men challenge assumptions about masculinity and the instrumentality usually associated with men's friendships. Other research has

demonstrated that men in general can be very intimate in the friendships they form with one another (Strikwerda & May, 1992). In this instance, not only would self-disclosure include the material that is positive and edifying for a relationship, but that which may also be destructive. Mutual disclosure also includes the outing of the skeletons in the closet. Giddens (1991) suggests that for this reason, the intimate relationships of same-sex couples are much more prone to break down, as they lie at the vanguard of the development of 'pure relationships'. In other words, the intimate relationships of gay men may at once be full of the promise of real intimacy, but at the same time may also be fragile because of this level of mutual disclosure.

It is not only, however, mutual disclosure that may threaten intimate relationships. As Jamieson suggests, 'It is clear that if same-sex couples do manage to securely maintain a long-term relationship, they do so despite a wider social fabric, which is relatively hostile to its institutionalisation' (1999: 487). In the case of Australia, it is clear that there are corners of the wider social fabric that are in fact extremely hostile to the institutionalisation of same-sex couple-hood.

Jamieson, following Weston (1991), suggests that 'gay men are more likely to feel that they have trouble sustaining intimacy' (1998: 154) within their couple relationship. This view is based on a brief exploration of the roles played by men in gay couples, particularly when inequalities of resources existed. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) earlier found that there is a positive correlation between income and power within the relationships of gay male couples. While this correlation may not be as strongly identifiable as in traditional marriages (Jamieson, 1998: 151), it often produced outcomes for the division of domestic labour. This is a clear pattern in straight couples' relationships, in other words, gender trumps money (Bittman et al., 2003). Additionally, 'congruence rather than complementarity' (Weston, 1991: 146) was sought in the sexual practices of gay male couples. These critiques of the 'pure relationship' are powerful and persuasive. This thesis revisits these critiques in an attempt to understand how the participants in this study talk about mutual disclosure and trust, and their significance in their intimate partner relationships.

All of this evidence suggests that intimacy is not necessarily easily achieved for gay men. The environment is hostile, shadows of doubt linger and inequalities may persist. Along with this is the unflagging narrative that gay men can easily side-line intimacy from sex. We now turn to the literature examining the divorce of sex and intimacy often glibly applied to the relationships of gay men. As we have seen, Giddens (1991) and Jamieson (1998) reproduce this narrative, albeit in slightly different ways. The following literature looks at how scholars in different disciplines have problematised the purportedly convenient uncoupling of sex and intimacy for gay men.

### **Redressing the divorce between sexuality and intimacy**

Scholars have sought to redress the casually-applied notion that gay men are expert at separating sex and intimacy. One view sees casual sex among gay men who are in stable partnerships as the divorce of intimacy and sex, and not sexual libertinism for its own sake. Gender, however, may play a role in this separation of sex and intimacy (Fee, 2000; Jamieson, 1998; Messner, 2001; Nardi, 1992; Swain, 1992). In studies of heterosexual couples, men were more likely than women to reduce understandings of intimacy to sex alone, this providing sufficient intimacy for the relationship (Rubin, 1976). In similar studies, women reported that sex with their partner was a chore in the absence of romantic gestures (Duncombe & Marsden, 1996), while enjoyment in sex was coupled with high levels of intimacy (O'Connor, 1995). This evidence suggests that the 'men part' of sex and intimacy plays a role in the intimate relationships of men (Nardi, 1992, 1999; Nardi & Sherrod, 1994). It can be argued in this context that gender differences, in approaches to sexuality, can also be used to explain why gay men and straight women get on so well, and why gay men like to make friends with straight men - in both groups, sex is not seen to be significant, thereby clearing the way for intimacy.

Other research found that some gay men express a desire for a normative monogamy, impelled by feelings of trust, yet feel fraught and anxious if this does not necessarily work out (Worth, Read & McMillan, 2002). There is also research that has looked at the way 'ground rules' may dictate the role that casual sex may have, if any, in the intimate relationships of gay men. Research has pointed out that Christian gay male couples, for example, have a tacit understanding that casual sexual encounters external to their own

relationship are never mentioned in the context of their couple-hood, as it would run contrary to the 'ground rules' for their relationship (Yip, 1997). These sociological investigations suggest that the divorce of sex and intimacy within gay men's romantic and couple relationships may not be as easy as commonly narrated.

Other debates about sexual intimacy focus on understandings of faithfulness. Despite its contested meanings and representations, faithfulness as a concept and set of practices, is partially theorised in the psychological literature around gay men and their intimate partner relationships. This theorising is often concerned with the intersection of gender and sexuality (Meier, Hull & Ortyl, 2009), briefly examining, and sometimes conflating, understandings of faithfulness and monogamy (Meier et al., 2009). In their study of young people, from both straight and sexual minorities groups, Meier et al., (2009) used the term faithfulness as a proxy for monogamy. The authors concede, however, that they were unable to replicate the findings from previous studies, that gay men have less monogamous relationships. And that: '... perhaps faithfulness has a somewhat different meaning for gay men. Faithfulness may refer to the emotional primacy of the relationship rather than its sexual exclusivity' (Meier et al., 2009: 12).

However, for the purposes of my argument, the employment of a definition of faithfulness which necessarily includes monogamy is problematic. This is particularly troubling when such a definition is employed in efforts to understand the negotiation of sexual agreements and gay men in curtailing the spread of HIV. In their study, Katherine Gass and colleagues (2012) used the term 'faithful' as a proxy for monogamy when exploring how sexual agreements are negotiated among men who have sex with men. They found that there was an inverse relationship between investment in sexual agreements and unprotected anal intercourse with a partner other than the main partner (Gass et al., 2012: 6), suggesting that investment in sexual agreements may have an impact on transmission of HIV (Rawstone et al., 2009). While this may in fact be the case, the conflation of monogamy and faithfulness in this context belies a deeper understanding of faithfulness and its sociological meanings.

As we will examine later in this chapter, the understanding of faithfulness developed by Georg Simmel ([1908]1950) highlights the intrinsic value of the relationship more

generally. This emphasis may be particularly helpful in explaining the nature of gay men's intimacies. Even more recently, sociologists have suggested ideas about faithfulness which downplay the emphasis on sexual monogamy. Research shows there is an innovation within gay male partnerships, which relates to negotiating sexual relationships both within and outside the partnership. Barry Adam (2006) found, for example, that while 'monogamy scripts' (Adam, 2006: 5) appear more commonly among younger gay men and gay men who are new to gay relationships, adventurous and autonomous, narratives also exist among gay men for whom innovation in sexual behaviour is, in some ways, a departure from the sexual practices of heterosexual hegemony (Adam, 2006: 5). Indeed, this suggests that non-monogamy among gay men does not indicate relationship failure (Adam, 2006: 8). Rather, it suggests that expectational and behavioural non-exclusivity, where mutually negotiated, may lead to trusting and enduring relationships (Yip, 1997). Similarly, mutual understanding, not the 'openness' or 'closedness' of the relationship per se (Adam, 2006), may be a better indicator of relationship satisfaction (Julien, Chartrand & Begin, 1996) and a predictor of safer sex practices (Wagner, Remien & Carballo-Diequez, 2000).

All of this theorising and empirical work occurs in the context of 'mainstream' arguments about the normativity of monogamy, and its resistance. On the one hand, medical science, as one example, in conflating faithfulness and monogamy, calls for 'partner reduction' to hinder the spread of HIV (Shelton et al., 2004), while on the other, 'celebratory' approaches to non-monogamy (Barker & Langdrige, 2010) have been put forward as a way of explaining the diversities and meanings (Barker & Langdrige, 2010) ascribed to contemporary sexual relationships and the understandings of faithfulness within these relationships. Here again, however, all of this evidence suggests that the story of sex and intimacy among gay men cannot be reduced to a simple divorcing of the two. Sex often carries more meaning than the simple physiological pleasure and this may bear heavily on the experience of intimacy and even friendship (Wilkinson et al., 2012).

Earlier in this chapter, we examined the stories around sex and intimacy that have been attached to gay men across the past 50 years or so. We looked at the changing face of resistance to oppression, and the opening of society's mainstream to stories about gay

men's intimate relationships. Different models of intimacy were explored: gay men seek intimacy just like everyone else, but may do so in unconventional ways. The next part of this review investigates understandings of love, and how these understandings may be informed by texts that lie outside of the canon of sociology. We then go on to explore how these stories are narrated, particularly in the context of broader societal resistance to these stories.

### **What purpose romance – theorising about love**

In her analysis of love and romance, Mary Evans (1998) uses principally the works of Jane Austen, alongside others to theorise about historical and contemporary approaches to love. For example, Evans identifies Austen as the 'most profound, and the most articulate' critic of romantic love in her works of post-Enlightenment fiction (Evans, 1998: 266). In the characters Austen drew, Evans (1998) suggests, we gain insight into the folly of a deluded romance story, particularly as this may relate to the empowerment of women. It could be argued that a similar delusion persists today, that while love was supposed to guarantee gay men freedom, material and social factors in fact 'usurped romance and love' (Evans, 1998: 274) and to some degree distorted our intimate relationships. Others have argued that a new type of 'confluent love' has emerged, that does not bear the hallmarks of traditionally locating romantic love in the context of marriage and monogamy. Giddens writes, for example:

Unlike romantic love, confluent love is not necessarily monogamous, in the sense of sexual exclusiveness. What holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, 'until further notice,' that each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile. Sexual exclusiveness here has a role in the relationship to the degree to which the partners mutually deem it desirable or essential. (Giddens, 1992: 63)

This is an important point in the theory of the 'pure relationship', and one that needs closer inspection. For many, and as Evans (2003: 135) contends, for more women than men, this version of love is not without its drawbacks. The notion of 'confluent love' has

made the meaning of love more problematic than it has been in the past (Evans, 2003: 135). The 'association of sexual relations with personal affection and commitment' (Evans, 2003: 135) has not simply evaporated. Rather, trying to understand intimate relations under these new conditions is complicated. This is because there is no longer an emphasis on the traditional ties that formerly 'structured' love and loving relationships. Research suggests, however, that the idea of 'unconditional love' persists in narratives around the features of an ideal partner (Jamieson, 1998: 160). Love has not ceased to exist, but it has been obscured by 'infantilizing constructions' (Evans, 2003: 274) of romance and love.

One other possible way of exploring the meaning of love is through love stories, their contents and the ways in which they are narrated. The love stories of gay men are usually told through the prism of love and its relationship with sex, often closely associated with investigating HIV prevention (Slavin, 2009). The love stories themselves are largely neglected in the sociological literature, in which concerns over health and subcultures take centre stage (Amaro, 2016; Robinson, 2014). This research on sexual practice is vital, however, there are other stories that need to be told in order to better understand gay men's intimate relationships.

As Ken Plummer (1995) has noted, the world abounds in stories. He makes special reference to stories of overcoming adversity, whether via the 'rape' story, or 'coming out' or 'recovery' stories. Plummer suggests, 'Stories breed stories' (1995: 59). Listening to and telling stories in this analysis are important in making sense of experience (Plummer, 1995: 5). Stories are a call to action, to right some wrong or to alleviate some pain (Plummer, 1995: 50). It is therefore imperative to tell the love stories of gay men to understand how they interpret their experiences and learn to be in the world.

There is one more conceptual point to make before moving on to the methodology. This is related to both the troubled stereotype of gay men and sexuality and the search for intimacy. Passion, as Simmel ([1908]1950) suggests, can sometimes draw people apart. What remains then to maintain social cohesion is, according to Simmel ([1908]1950), faithfulness.



## Faithfulness

So far, I have argued that the sexual stereotype of gay men obscures the intimacies which many gay men crave and in fact experience. One of the ways of understanding and reconciling the seemingly contradictory relationship between sex and intimacy is by looking at the role of love. Love stories, not of the commercialised romantic type, are important in understanding how, and in this case, how gay men understand their intimate relationships, and lives. One other way of exploring this reconciliation is in understandings of faithfulness. In his work on faithfulness, Georg Simmel ([1908]1950) does not so much define exactly what faithfulness is, as offer perspectives on the effects faithfulness may have on society, on the individual and, intimate relationships. Consistent with Simmel's formal Sociology, Simmel does not offer the reader an example of faithfulness in operation. Rather, the implication is that faithfulness provides a means through which competing forces in society can exist side-by-side, without rending society apart. In this way, faithfulness becomes 'significant as a sociological form of the second order' ([1908]1950: 379), one in which the complexities of interpersonal relations are acknowledged and given weight to shape the interactions themselves (Simmel, [1908]1950: 379).

In Simmel's analysis, faithfulness is an 'emotional reflection of the autonomous life of the relation,' ([1908]1950: 383) the idea that a relationship has a value in itself, and that it may endure irrespective of the original reasons for the commencement of that relation.

Simmel describes the effect of faithfulness in individual intimacy primarily as social cohesion, and therefore questions how faithfulness may be seen in relation to love. On the one hand, love is characterised as the glue that holds partners together (Simmel, [1908]1950: 379-80). If this is the case, Simmel asks rhetorically, 'why must faithfulness, as the guardian of the relationship, be added after ten years if, by definition, love remains identical even then, and still on its own strength has its initial binding power?' ([1908]1950: 379-80). Indeed, if the partners love one another – and are connected 'by the primary and genuine psychological disposition of love' – faithfulness must serve another purpose. This purpose is social cohesion. At the same

time, Simmel suggests that it is also the passion involved in loving, intimate relationships that may drive lovers apart, even while tearing down the 'borders of the ego' to envelope the 'I' and 'thou' as one (Simmel, [1908]1950: 128). These paradoxes, characteristic of much of Simmel's work, point, however, to the possibility that faithfulness can safeguard love. Simmel understands love as an inherently passionate and volatile relationship, and it is faithfulness that smooths out some of the ups and downs and grounds the relationship.

We can therefore see that faithfulness is an expression of the value of the relationship in itself, providing a secure sense that the relationship is valuable even when passion gets in the way. Faithfulness represents a way in which the contradiction of sex and intimacy can be resolved. A practical example of faithfulness in operation is seen in the way gay men and their ex-lovers often remain friends (Jamieson, 1998: 156), and in the way intimate partners describe the care they have for their current and former partners, despite perhaps going separate ways (Flaherty, 2013).

In this chapter, we have explored the study of the intimate relationships of gay men over the past 50 years. Focus has been directed towards analysis of gay men's sexuality and, in particular, a sexual stereotype that deserves questioning. An argument has been presented that questions this stereotype, and the search for intimacy and love has been documented as a key concern for gay men. The meaning of love has been examined, bracketing it off from commercialised romance scripts. Storytelling has been suggested as a way of understanding these intimate relationships among gay men. One form of this storytelling augments the stories of research participants, with those from other cultural texts, whether fiction in a similar vein to Evans (1998; 2003), or from auto/biography, in a similar way to Plummer (1995). It is to these methodological concerns we now turn.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology



#### Research Design

The research design of this dissertation was built around interviews of ten same-sex attracted males and a form of narrative analysis that included literary and cultural texts. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed and comparisons were drawn between the narratives produced in the interviews, with the narratives found in English fictional literature, contemporary popular media and the theoretical narratives found in the work of Sontag (1989), Jamieson (1998; 1999), Giddens (1991; 1992) and Beck (2000). This comparison aimed to illustrate how works of fiction and popular media influence the way in which the interviewees develop their own personal narratives. The narratives of the democratisation of personal life and love relationships are seen in the ways which the interviewees consider their own personal narratives. This comparison attempts to build a theoretical bridge between ‘cultural determinism’, or the belief that we are entirely shaped by the culture in which we live, on one hand, and the totality of a ‘do-it-yourself biography’ (Beck, 2000: 166) on the other.

The methodology of this dissertation comprises three forms of qualitative research. The first element is an analysis of three English language texts, both fictional and auto/biographical. Such analyses can provide insights into the ways in which an individual generates narratives of their own regarding themselves and others around them (Plath, 1980; Denzin, 1989; Banks & Banks, 1998). Secondly, there were two rounds of unstructured interviews with the same ten participants. The unstructured interview enables discussion on sensitive topics and an observation of the ways in which individuals interact with one another (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Hopper, 1998). The narratives derived from these interviews were used to establish a sort of ‘baseline’ in the participants’ thinking about sex, love and intimacy more broadly. The third part of the methodology was the introduction of a set text,  *Holding the Man*  by

Timothy Conigrave (1995). This took place after the first round of interviews. The participants were then re-interviewed after they had read the set text, or had become familiar with the content. Again, ten interviews were conducted. These interviews were more structured and included questions regarding the set text in relation to each participant's personal narrative. A rationale for the introduction of the set text and second-round interviews was to provide a common frame of reference for the participants for the second round of interviews (Ellis et al., 1997). Most importantly, *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) was introduced to explore the connections between, fiction, auto/biography and personal narrative (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Bruner, 1984; Denzin, 1989). Lastly, thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts from the interviews. This analysis provided an effective tool for engaging with the authenticity of the interviewees' experiences (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987; Silverman, 1993), as well as engaging with broader debate about the utility of the humanities in examining social processes (Krieger, 1991; Stanley, 1993; Banks & Banks, 1998).

### **1. Textual analysis: questioning the stereotype of gay men in late modernity**

Narrative analysis is used to disentangle the stereotypical representation of gay men in late modernity from the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Narratives surrounding gay men in late modernity appearing in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001), *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006) and *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) were analysed. Narrative analysis was employed for two reasons. Firstly, narratives are 'packed with sociological information' (Franzosi, 1998). Secondly, much of the empirical evidence we wish to explore arrives in narrative form (Franzosi, 1998: 519). Personal narrative is an elemental part of understanding this 'disembedded' world (Giddens, 1991), the construction of an auto/biography as a means of securing an integrated sense of self (Giddens 1991: 76). These texts were chosen as they are, with the exception of *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006), largely works of auto/biography, elements of which would be highly familiar to the participants. Similarly, *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006), is replete with themes with which the participants closely identified.

Using narrative analysis, this dissertation examines whether the highly-sexualised 'lifestyle' stereotype of gay men is a reality for the participants. While Ruth Hennessy may have been speaking more discursively when using the word 'lifestyle' (Hennessy, 1994-1995: 166), the meaning of the word also includes its day-to-day reality. The 'Lifestyle' consumer culture' (Hennessy, 1994-1995: 166) for example, she notes, has been particularly influential in the current narrative adopted by many gay men - it is through the broadening of consumer possibilities that queer has been released from 'moral censure' (Hennessy, 1994-1995: 166). Think for example of 'gay cruises' or 'gay film festivals'. In many ways, these stereotypical representations of gay men persist, especially as they may relate to consumerism and sexualised iconography. It may be argued however, that the capitalist expansion of last century has, rather than providing lasting freedom for gay men, re-affirmed the moral dictates of the notion of family, particularly with the current shift to the right of politics in developed nations, and has therefore proscribed certain lifestyle choices (D'Emilio, 1993). This is, however, not the case when viewed through the lens of the 'homosexual/queer spectacle' (Hennessy, 1994-1995: 173). Through this lens, the current gay man is regularly seen as part of a homogenous, affluent middle-class. Nonetheless, he is still the other, excluded from love stories and, his intimate relationships often consigned to the trivial or fleeting. Analysis of these narratives can therefore open possibilities for different narratives, those based in love, trust and mutual disclosure.

## **2. Questionnaires and Interview**

### ***Questionnaires***

Brief questionnaires were used in this dissertation for three primary reasons:

1. Demographic data about the participants in the research was yielded by the questionnaires. This dissertation examines the qualitative aspects of the data yielded and does not necessarily reflect more generally the responses and characteristics of the group from which the participants come (de Vaus, 1986: 52). Susan Krieger, in discussing social scientists' use of auto/biography in their work, concludes that the readers of social research 'have become increasingly dissatisfied with the tone of remote authority commonly used in the writing of social science' (1991: 47). This may also apply to writing in which the participants themselves are not individualised. The

demographic information was used to individualise the responses of the participants, and to provide context for their narratives. James' response, for example, was examined in the context of his self-identification as a gay man, affluent and twenty-eight years of age as an individualised personal narrative. Part of the aim of this dissertation was to identify various narratives in the personal lives of the participants by using demographic information to contextualise their experiences. The contextualising of the participants experiences was based on the 'understanding that participants in social life actively produce a context for what they do and that social researchers should not simply import their own about what context is relevant in any situation' (Silverman, 1993: 8).

2. The interviews were conducted according to the method of interactive interviewing, 'an interpretive practice for getting an in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences with emotionally-charged and sensitive topics' (Ellis, et al., 1997: 121). As the interviewer, I attended to my own feelings and experiences during the interviews to assess validity and bias (Laslett & Rapoport, 1975; Hertz, 1995; Jorgenson, 1995; Miller, 1996). As Shulamit Reinharz explains, 'the self we create in the field is a product of the norms of the social setting and the ways in which the 'research subjects' interact with the selves the researcher brings to the field' (1997: 3). Consistent with the rationale stated above (Reinharz, 1997) I wanted to avoid positioning an overarching researcher's self in the middle of every interview which could influence the participants' view of how they should respond. At the same time, the researcher's self was sublimated in the initial stages of the interview process in order to avoid positioning it centrally.

3. The questionnaires were used as a basis for the unstructured interviews. The questionnaires revealed which pieces of literature the participants would be able to discuss in the context of the participants having some knowledge of the texts listed in the questionnaire. The questionnaires were designed to encourage the participants to reflect on representations of intimate relationships in English-language fictional and non-fictional literature, and how various pieces of literature have affected their own narratives. The purpose of this part of the interview process was to illustrate that 'when the reader reads a biographical text, that text is read through the life of the

reader. Hence writers and readers conspire to create the lives they write and read about' (Denzin, 1989: 26). As Denzin (1989) suggests, when an individual reads a text, fictional or non-fictional, the narratives of the writer and reader may become entangled (Roth, 1988; Lesser, 1988). This part of the interview process examined this entanglement.

### ***The Interviews***

Interactive interviewing was used in this study as a method of gaining rich data from the participants on topics that the participants found sensitive and emotionally confronting (Ellis et al., 1997: 121). The effect of the interviewer in this interactive process was also considered. The 'interpretive practice' (Ellis et al., 1997: 121) of interactive interviewing problematises 'value-free scientific inquiry' (Ellis et al., 1997: 121; Roberts, 1981; Cook & Fonow, 1986; Reinhartz, 1992). According to this practice, the ongoing relationship of the interviewer and the interviewees is understood as a process in which 'the social identities of both interviewers and interviewees continually change as each responds to the other' (Ellis et al., 1997: 123). This practice accommodates the changing thoughts and feelings of the interviewer and interviewees over time, an approach favoured to garner a more diachronic sense of life story (Plummer, 2010). In addition, follow-up interviews were conducted with four of the ten original interviewees nearly ten years later. The rationale here was to examine how their 'stories' (Plummer, 1995) may have changed over this extended period. In combination with its form of story-telling, this form of 'biographical ethnography' (Stanley, 1993: 57) allows for the constant forming and re-forming of the direction of the research, 'in line with the changing assessments of what is required by the process of theory construction' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997: 24). Using this method, it was possible to examine the ways in which the interviewer's and interviewees' attitudes towards various pieces of literature, as well as their attitudes to their intimate relationships, changed over time (Jorgenson, 1991, 1995).

The rationale for this type of interviewing was based on the idea that 'biographical ethnography can aid the steering of a course 'between the over-determinism of some varieties of socialisation theory, and the opposite extreme of seeing selves as extremely unique individuals which are the product of inner psychological processes'' (Stanley,

1993: 2,). Rather than seeing the participants in this study as only the product of their 'inner worlds,' an attempt was made to unravel their personal narratives and the narratives that they have vicariously experienced, and possibly engaged, in Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* (2006), Quan's *Calendar Boy* (2001) and Conigrave's *Holding the Man* (1995). Coffey describes this approach as being at once able to uncover the 'intertextual links between reality and representations of reality' (1999: 132) as well as conceptualise the "life' or 'lives'" as the product of biographies that are inextricably interwoven and networked' (1999: 132). This dissertation presents the lives of the interviewees as biographical constructions in the same way that narrative analysis examined the biographies of the characters in the fictional and non-fictional literature.

The interview process itself progressed through the following stages in succession:

1. Once the individual participants had completed the preliminary procedures including the questionnaires, they were asked to participate in a non-standardised interview, the duration of which was approximately one hour.
2. After the initial interview, the participants were given a copy of the set-text, *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) and asked to read it, or – if they had already read it – to reserve their responses to the text until a second interview.
3. At the second interview, participants were asked to consider in depth their response to the set text. A detailed discussion of the questions asked of the participants follows in a later chapter.

### **3. The Set Text: fictional narratives coalescing with the lives of the participants**

The set text was *Holding the Man* (1995) by Timothy Conigrave. This text is approximately three hundred pages long, and is an autobiographical work. The author details his relationship with his male partner, from first falling in love in secondary school to their separate lives in Sydney and Melbourne and finally the death of his partner from AIDS-related illnesses. The text spans fifteen years, from the mid-1970s until the early 1990s. The text has also been adapted for the stage, and had two sold out



seasons in Sydney between December 2006 and March 2007, and returned to the stage with the same cast for another season at a much larger theatre later in 2007. *Holding the Man* is one of Australia's Favourite 100 Books (2003 Australian Society of Authors 40th Anniversary list), and won the United Nations Human Rights Award for Non-fiction in 1995. This text was selected because many parallels can be made between the lives of the central characters and the lives of the interviewees. Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004) have suggested that in literary reading, certain objects, events and feelings are recognised by the reader as familiar and reminiscent of past experiences. On some occasions, however, readers 'also find themselves participating in an unconventional flow of feelings through which they realize something that they have not previously experienced—or at least not in the form provided by the text' (Kuiken et al., 2004: 175).

Under these conditions, the imaginary world of the text may become unsettled, 'one aspect of this disquietude is the possibility that the shifting experience of the world of the text may be carried forward as an altered understanding of the reader's own lifeworld' (Kuiken et.al., 2004: 175). As a result of this altered sense of the reader's lifeworld, the reader may be impelled to contend with 'self-modifying feelings' (Kuiken et.al., 2004: 175) that transform the reader's understanding of the text and at the same time, their sense of themselves (Kuiken et.al., 2004: 175). This process may follow a predictable path; that is, familiar scripts of feelings may arise: 'the scripted progression of feelings embodied in a literary text may remind readers of similarly scripted events that instantiate their personal strivings' [emphasis added] (Kuiken et.al., 2004: 176). It is here that reading therefore becomes 'self-implicating' – that is, the reader implicates themselves into the narrative of the text, and derives affective 'similes and metaphors' (Kuiken et. al., 2004: 177), possibly leading to self-modifying feelings. The rationale therefore for the introduction of the set text comprises its familiarity, in terms of time, place and content for the interviewees. This text was also chosen to provide a common frame of reference for the participants in answering the more structured questions in the second round of interviews.

This dissertation points to the ways in which both fiction and non-fictional texts may have a transformative effect on the way an individual develops their own narratives about themselves and about society more generally. As Brenneis states: 'stories both

draw upon experience and engender it' (1996: 42). This dissertation reflects upon Brenneis' (1996) assertion that stories are reflective of, and influence personal narratives, and the process through which an individual engages with fiction and non-fiction, and engages in narrating his own experience. As the set text is an auto/biography, it was typically easy for the participants to see how 'such texts create 'real' persons about whom truthful statements are presumably made' (Denzin, 1993: 26). It is argued, therefore, that there is a lot more to auto/biographical work than simply 'real persons.' This dissertation explores the possibility that 'lives and the (auto)biographical methods that construct them are literary productions...these texts are narrative fictions, cut from the same cloth as the lives they tell about' (Denzin, 1993: 26; Bertaux, 1981; Plummer, 1983). Strong emotions and complex considerations are given to the intimate relationships in the set text. The text was used to educe the 'deep, inner life of the person [which] can be captured in an autobiographical or biographical document' (Denzin, 1993: 29) as narrated by the participants. In this way, the set text was used to encourage the interviewees to think about their 'deep inner worlds' in relation to the 'deep inner worlds' of the characters in the text, for example, the tensions brought by dishonesty within an intimate relationship. From this standpoint, the material provided in the interviews effectively became a form of auto/biography: the stories that the interviewees told about themselves.

The responses of the participants were compared in order to uncover common links between the narrative of the set text and the narratives the participants produced as their auto/biography. In this way, it was possible to bring into relief the way in which the narrative of the set text coalesced with the narratives of the participants. The texts, or narratives, had become interwoven, 'this interweaving... is the text produced only in the transformation of another text' (Derrida, 1981: 26). Auto/biography as fiction is illustrated in this way to be an effective 'literary and sociological form that creates particular images of subjects in particular historical moments' (Denzin, 1993), and may inform an understanding of intimate interpersonal relationships among gay men in late modernity.

#### **4. From personal narrative to broader, sociological narratives**

An aim of this dissertation is to suggest that relationships akin to 'pure relationships,' relationships in which sexuality is 'doubly constituted as a medium of self-realisation and as a prime means, as well as an expression, of intimacy' (Giddens, 1991: 164) are expressed in the narratives of the participants in this study. A further aim of this dissertation is to point to the possibility that the fulfilment derived from these relationships, 'a wholesale democratising of the interpersonal domain' (Giddens, 1992: 3), lends itself to democratisation of the public sphere (Giddens, 1992: 3). In other words, the opening of the sphere of intimate relationships to more democratic process may lead to broader social change. This is qualitatively explored in a narrative analysis of unstructured and structured interviews of ten gay men living in late modern Australia. Narrative analysis can take several forms: the approach of this dissertation was informed by the work of Anna and Stephen Banks (1998).

In their book *Fiction and Social Research: By Ice or Fire*, Anna and Stephen Banks, advocate the use of 'fiction's expressive modalities' (1998: 19; Haarsager, 1998) to make academic writing more accessible to broader audiences. Stephen Banks was reacting to his perception that academic writing is becoming ever more atomistic and specialised in its language content (1998: 12). The methodology employed by Banks and Banks, following Mumby (1997), is to organise their research into sections that 'reflect four epistemological stances' (Banks & Banks, 1998: 19): narratives of representation, understanding, suspicion and vulnerability. The methodology employed by Banks and Banks (1998) provided the foundation for the consideration and organisation of the narratives of the individual participants revealed in the interviews. In this study, these narratives were similarly organised into four broader categories, and then arranged according to themes associated with understandings of sex, intimacy and love: the narratives of representation, the narratives of confession, the interactive narratives and the narratives of possibility. The material drawn from the interviews was organised in this way to allow for intertextual connections to be made that could further explore the theoretical (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2000) foundation on which this dissertation is based.

Anthony Giddens' (1991) representation of social relations in late modernity provides a compelling account of the intimate relationships of gay men at present. It is perhaps erroneous, however, to conclude that there is a 'peculiar dynamic' (Giddens, 1991: 16) in modern social life. On the other hand, if there is a certain authenticity in the social relations of late modernity, by what may they be signified? Giddens argues that one way in which this uniqueness may be identified is in the 'disembedding mechanisms' (1991: 17) of the present. When these mechanisms are broken down into their two types, 'symbolic tokens' and 'expert systems' (Giddens, 1991: 18), it is possible to examine intimate gay male relationships in contemporary society using this framework.

According to Giddens, these 'abstract systems' (1991: 18) depend upon trust. It is what Giddens identifies as the 'intrinsic reflexivity' (1991: 19) of late modernity that draws individuals into the authenticity of late modern relations. Whether an individual trusts or not is not always impelled by conscious decision-making, but rather a 'generalised attitude of mind' (Giddens, 1991: 19), the faith implied by trust is often resistant to such calculations (Giddens, 1991: 19).

Ulrich Beck's (2000) 'runaway world' is in many ways a world in which the abstract systems Giddens (1991) identifies, may influence our self-construction. Inherent in Beck's analysis is the possibility that it is only through a constant reflexive construction of self, that any individual can participate fully in modern society (2000: 171). Beck suggests living one's own life is a matter of 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck, 2000: 166). Beck did not deny, however, the potential for false consciousness (2000: 168). That is, while life-story may be distinguishable from biography in as much as biography implies individual authorship, it is clear that there are 'alien' causes. (Beck, 2000: 168) over which an individual may have no influence in their construction of themselves. The connections between the personal and the broader sociological narratives are explored in the enabling process Beck has described as the 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck, 2000: 171). Further, the idea of a 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck, 2000: 171) suggests that in many ways, an individual has the capacity, despite periodic points of 'false consciousness' (Beck, 2000: 168) to write their own personal narratives as they go along. The constant writing and rewriting of an individual's personal narrative is the element of Beck's (2000) analysis linking it most closely to the 'pure relationship'. As

Giddens suggests, a 'pure relationship' is developed through testing and re-testing of the 'rules' (1991: 145) of the relationship. This can only occur as new challenges arise in the relationship, and new solutions are accommodated. A key focus of the interviews was to explore how the participants negotiate this process.

The differing conceptions of 'communicative codes' referred to by both Sontag (1989) and Giddens (1991) are explored through the narratives of the participants. Sontag (1989) describes the 'communicative code' of same-sex attracted males as a process by which 'the institutions of urban homosexual life became a sexual delivery system of unprecedented speed, efficiency and volume' (Sontag, 1989: 76). Giddens (1991) takes a different view, that the 'communicative code' of sexuality is not institutionalised, but separate from the 'wider exigencies of human existence' (Giddens, 1991: 164). Sexuality, according to Giddens (1991) can be a means and expression of intimacy. This dissertation examines the contradiction in these two positions by analysing the ways the participants narrate their experiences of sexuality in relation to understandings of a 'communicative code'. It was important to place the narratives of the intimate couple relationships of the participants both within these differing theoretical frames as well as within the development of individual biographies relative to the development of intimate couple relationships. Such an analysis is based on the recognition that:

Interpersonal relationships, like works of dramatic fiction, are largely preformed in talk. We can observe the state of interpersonal relationships by the ways friends or loved ones speak to one another.  
(Hopper, 1998: 33)

Hopper's (1998) work was a direct comparison of the language of flirtation found in a diversity of texts, including Shakespearean plays and Twentieth Century film, with the spontaneous language of flirtation he witnessed in his fieldwork. In the comparison within this dissertation, the differing 'communicative codes' of Sontag (1989) and Giddens (1991) were highlighted and examined.

The narratives produced in the interviews were examined as autobiographical narratives. An aim of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which these

autobiographical narratives coalesce with broader, sociological narratives, that is, how the personal narratives of the individual participants connect with the narratives of intimate relationships – these relationships the primary site for individuals to find ‘forms of self-exploration and moral construction’ (Giddens, 1992: 144). In this way, the links between the narrative of the ‘do-it-yourself biography’ (Beck, 2000: 166) and the biographies of the interviewees are explored. As Lemert (1986) has suggested, ‘sociological biography and auto/biography as intellectual history merge personal lives with the world of ideas’ (as cited in Denzin 1989: 40). When sociologists view lives as objectively observable and separate from the autobiographical narratives produced by their subjects, ‘they perpetuate the illusion that sociological facts take precedence over, and are therefore unlike, fictional literary narratives’ (Denzin, 1989: 41; Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Consistent with this view, this dissertation illustrates how sociological facts may be revealed in fictional narratives and auto/biography. In comparing fictional and non-fictional narratives, the narratives of the interviewees and the broader sociological narratives of Giddens (1991) and Beck (2000), we can observe their coalescence. These narratives may then be seen as ‘doubly anchored’ (Briggs, 1996: 42), that is in the lives about which they speak and the phenomena they reveal: ‘Narratives are keyed both to the events in which they are told and to the events they recount, toward narrative events and narrated events’ (Bauman, 1986: 2). This ‘double anchoring’ is explored in this dissertation by comparing the narratives of the interviewees and the broader sociological narratives.

Interactive interviews were used in this dissertation to draw personal narratives, or autobiographies, from ten gay men. These autobiographical constructions were compared with the broader theoretical positions of Sontag (1989), Jamieson (1998; 1999), Giddens (1991; 1992) and Beck (2000). Literary and cultural texts were used as stimuli to encourage the interviewees to think about their own personal narratives and the ways in which they have been influenced by such texts. The analysis of the interviews suggests that both the literary and cultural texts, as well as the broader theoretical narratives, are reflected in the personal narratives of these men. A theoretical bridge was built between ‘cultural determinism’ and ‘do-it-yourself

biography' (Beck, 2000: 166), using narrative analysis, and engaging with the current debate regarding the possibility that certain ideographic knowledge can point us to wider social processes.

The next chapter examines more closely how the fictive and autobiographical works relate to broader social issues and how the participants navigate their way through the social world using some of the themes from these texts as pointers. Narratives around sex, intimacy and the crisis of self-realisation are explored, along with models of intimacy, such as the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991). One such resolution to this crisis lies in this model of intimacy. In the analysis of the texts, love also emerges as a resolution.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Texts

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In this chapter, three English literary texts are discussed. One of these texts is a work of fiction, while the others are works of auto/biography. The connections these texts share with the mores of their time and place are highlighted. The ideas about sexuality, intimacy and love which emerge from these texts are introduced as an entry point for identifying aspects of my respondents' narratives and related sociological concepts which form the basis of chapters four and five.

The auto/biographical work, *Holding the Man*, the text chosen as the 'set-text' in the larger dissertation, is used in particular to illustrate three key concepts bearing heavily upon the capacity of same-sex attracted men to form intimate, meaningful and close interpersonal relationships. Firstly, the significance of sex as a code of communication in the relationships of same-sex attracted men is examined in the context of both the freedoms and hardships this code can bring. Secondly, the crisis of self-realisation is examined across time and place. Analysis of interpretations of the 'closet' on the one hand suggests that, 'Living in the closet entails such intensive and extensive daily efforts at self-management that homosexuality often becomes the basis for a primary self-identity and a basic way of life' (Seidman, 2001: 322-323). On the other hand, however, against the social pressure to keep one's homosexuality a secret, gay pride is affirmed and a socially-integrated individual may be produced (Seidman, 2001). The crisis is here then suggested to have both liberating and restrictive possibilities. Lastly, the narratives of all of the texts are contextualised within an understanding of the 'pure relationship' as described by Anthony Giddens (1991). By drawing together the sociological narratives and the narratives the characters in the texts have produced, it is possible to suggest some of the ways in which the sociological becomes the personal in the lives of the characters.



## Introduction to the texts

### *Brokeback Mountain: Identity, happiness and external criteria*

Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, over the course of their first twenty adult years, live separated by twelve hundred miles of US farmland and the thought that if their relationship were to become public they would almost certainly come to an untimely and violent death. In Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* (2006), Jack and Ennis, despite their uncommon love for one another, and their understanding that 'this ain't no little thing that's happenin here' (Proulx, 2006: 301) are unable to overcome the 'external criteria' (Giddens, 1991: 6) keeping them apart. Their first sexual encounter as nineteen-year-old sheep herders on *Brokeback Mountain* is followed by twenty years of confusion, at least for Ennis, who felt 'in a disquieting way, everything seemed mixed' (Proulx, 2006: 292). For Jack, the pursuit of happiness was subsumed by the ability to extort from his father-in-law sufficient money to create for him a financially-independent life (Proulx, 2006: 300). The story begins in 1963 in Wyoming. It becomes instantly clear that this is neither the time nor the place for the kind of relationship that it is shown Jack and Ennis need. It is perhaps by examining the counter-ideal type of relationship in which Jack and Ennis engage that a clearer focus may be drawn on that which constitutes a 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991: 6). The intimacy borne of trust in pure relationships is described by Giddens in the following way:

To build up trust, an individual must be both trusting and trustworthy, at least within the confines of the relationship. Since it is so closely connected to intimacy, trust implies the same balance of autonomy and mutual disclosure necessary to sustain intimate exchanges. What matters in the building of trust in the pure relationship is that each person should know the other's personality, and be able to rely on regularly eliciting certain sorts of desired responses from the other...What matters is that one can rely on what the other says and does. (Giddens, 1992: 96)

If two defining and constitutive elements of Giddens' 'pure relationship' are mutual disclosure and trust (1991: 6), then it is possible to see how the absence of these two features in the relationship of Jack and Ennis lead not only to their submission to the

pressure of external criteria, but ultimately to the destruction of identity and the impossibility of happiness. Immediately after Jack and Ennis' first sexual encounter, both men claim, 'I'm not no queer' (Proulx, 2006: 291), and Jack declares that the tryst is 'nobody's business but ours' (Proulx, 2006: 291). In these declarations, the primary elements of the lack of trust and the inability to mutually disclose are demonstrated. It could of course be argued that in fact, such assertions represent mutual disclosure, as it is possible that neither man is queer, and that they both trust this to be true, but it is crucial that these assertions, among other pressures, deny Jack and Ennis the relationship that may have produced less sporadic and more lasting happiness.

### ***Calendar Boy: Identity, relationships and falling in love***

The protagonist who remains relatively autobiographical in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) does not demonstrate that 'to be a homosexual in our society is to be constantly aware that one bears a stigma' (Altman, 1993: 117), not, at least, a stigma that is only associated with a 'social life-style' (Altman, 1993: 117). Instead, this protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001), although homosexual, tends to exhibit the tendency to stigmatise 'othered' groups in society, 'nonwhites most obviously' (Altman, 1993: 117). The protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) was born in Vancouver, Canada, to a family of Chinese origin. The stories approximating most closely autobiographies follow the storyteller from his upbringing in British Columbia, to his university years in Peterborough, Ontario, a town of approximately sixty thousand people, his post-university odyssey through Europe and on to settling in Sydney, Australia – and the consequent writing of *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001). Much of the narrative of *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) is concerned with the perpetual tension that exists between the feeling of falling or being in love and the yearning for intimacy and the drive towards sexual experiences (all but devoid of the feeling usually associated with being in love). Giddens too identifies this tension, and in particular its connection with pure relationships:

As Alberoni (Francesco Falling in Love, New York, Random Hse, 1983, p. 13) points out, the experience of falling in love – rather than day-to-day sexual encounters – epitomises this phenomenon. Falling in love, in

contrast to most forms of sexuality, is intense, exalting and specifically 'extraordinary'. At these times, sexuality becomes the means by which life explores the frontiers of the possible, the horizons of the imaginary and of nature. (Giddens, 1992: 206)

For the protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001), the 'exalting' process of falling in love and negotiating sexuality within this process was a form of self-exploration, entering the sphere of plastic sexuality in which '...the detritus of external compulsions' (Giddens, 1992: 144) have disappeared and are replaced 'as one among other forms of self-exploration and moral construction' (Giddens, 1992: 144). Giddens' (1992) reference to detritus does not imply elements such as love, rather, it implies the denial of the tension that often exists when considering sexuality, intimacy and falling in love.

The consequence of pure relationships, and the potential for intimacy this signifies, introduces the possibility of a whole new understanding of one's own identity as well as that of others:

In a pure relationship, the individual does not simply 'recognise the other' and in the responses of that other find his self-identity affirmed. Rather...self-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other. (Giddens, 1992: 97)

### ***Holding the Man: an exploration of the 'pure relationship'***

Tim Conigrave, the author of  *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) meets John Caleo as a teenager at a Catholic secondary school in Melbourne in the early 1970s. John is the captain of the football team, garnering him great respect among his peers. Tim on the other hand is more involved in academic activities and drama. Towards the end of their secondary schooling, Tim and John express their romantic love for one another and engage in a sexual relationship, much to the displeasure of John's Catholic parents. Nonetheless, Tim and John continue their relationship in various forms until John's death from AIDS-related illnesses in 1992. Tim and John are not sexually-exclusive during much of their relationship. At times, they live apart, one in Sydney, one in

Melbourne. At other times, they enter into short-term relationships with other men; yet at other times their lives are deeply and inseparably enmeshed in every aspect, including their sexual lives.

In many ways, their relationship is not characterised by the conventional elements of an intimate partner relationship, such as sexual exclusivity and cohabitation. It is clear, however, that from the earliest stages of Tim and John's relationship, they share a warm and defining intimacy. In one instance, for example, after John has been the subject of ridicule by his classmates, Tim describes his desire to share his affection for John: 'Patrick leant over and gave John a friendly punch in the arm. John looked quite shaken. I wanted to put my arms around him. Just to hold him' (Conigrave, 1995: 33). In many ways too, despite his sexual adventurousness, Tim narrates a barrenness to some of his sexual encounters, a feeling alien in his relationship with John. When, for example, Tim has his first sexual encounter outside of their relationship, he laments, 'Well, I've done it. I've crossed the line. I don't feel different. If anything, I feel worse. Something was missing' (Conigrave, 1995: 141).

After John's death, Tim is even more cognizant of that which he has lost – an intimacy and closeness that cannot be replicated or replaced: 'You are a hole in my life, a black hole. Anything I place there cannot be returned. I miss you terribly' (Conigrave, 1995: 286).

Elements of the relationship between Tim Conigrave and John Caleo align closely with the idea of the 'pure relationship' – as with the protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) – and its association with 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992: 144). However, it is within this sexuality, although not exclusively, that Tim and John strike their 'self-exploration and moral construction' (Giddens, 1992: 144). What then is that 'black hole,' the bit 'missing' Tim narrates in the absence of John? Love, not of the romantic kind, but 'confluent love' (Giddens, 1992: 62), the love that 'develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other' (Giddens, 1992: 62). Tim and John are open about their various intimate and sexual relationships, yet remain loving companions until John's death, suggesting an 'equality in emotional give and take'

(Giddens, 1992: 62) and a relationship that 'approximates closely to the prototype of the pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992: 62).

### **1. Sex, or the communicative code**

Some observers of the relationship between Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006) might suggest that sex alone was sufficient foundation for the development and maintenance of this interaction. These critics would cite the vigour with which the sex in their relationship was pursued, from the initial stages of open-air activities right through the summer, 'sheep be damned' (Proulx, 2006: 291), to the meeting of Jack and Ennis four years later, not having seen one another in the interim and 'within twenty minutes, were in the Motel Siesta jouncing a bed' (Proulx, 2006: 296). It seems unlikely, however, that they had 'reconstituted themselves as something like an ethnic group, one whose distinctive folkloric custom was sexual voracity' (Sontag, 1989: 76). The sexual aspect of the relationship between Jack and Ennis must above all be kept secret, for it was this that endangered their lives. It was only in the privacy of hotel rooms for example that Jack and Ennis could engage the sexual passion they felt for one another. And whereas most couples require a level of privacy for sexual intimacy, for Jack and Ennis, any public affection was impossible. Here too, the possibility of disclosing their thoughts and feelings opened up in this private world. Secrecy provided a safe place in which to construct their relationship: 'Secret relationships provide a harbor from the normative world where an apparently ideal relationship can be constructed and individuation and trust created' (Richardson, 1988: 218).

Jack and Ennis sought this haven away from the 'normative world' in order to express their true feelings, their desires and their love, in whichever roundabout ways. In one such encounter, after discussing the possibilities of their relationship, Jack exclaims, 'Friend...We got us a fuckin situation here. Got to figure out what to do' (Proulx, 2006: 299). In this privacy too, they were able to reconcile moral quandaries felt keenly about their sexual relationship. In some ways, the relationship of Jack and Ennis approaches a pure relationship, for it is in privacy that the intimacy they share overcomes the moral

dilemma (as they see it) of their relationship. Giddens describes this process in the following way:

Passion has become privatised; yet its implications and resonance are far from private. Sexuality has become one main element of the striving for intimacy, but it addresses problems and stimulates feelings which are not restricted to a personal relation between two human beings. In intimate sexual relationships, people today frequently find their greatest moral satisfactions in life. (Giddens, 1992: 205)

In many ways, however, the relationship of Jack and Ennis goes further than privacy – they attempt to keep it a secret. Logically, the more sexual partners with whom they engaged, the more likely it was that their secret would be revealed. Much later, just before Jack dies, he remembers ‘that distant summer on Brokeback when Ennis had come up behind him and pulled him close, the silent embrace satisfying some shared and sexless hunger’ (Proulx, 2006: 310). The vivid descriptions of Jack and Ennis’ sexual encounters several times in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006) are always set, however, within the context of attempted secrecy, not merely privacy. For up on Brokeback it is from the gaze of their employer that they must hide (Proulx, 2006: 291), and back in town, from the gaze of just about everyone (Proulx, 2006: 301).

Nonetheless, it is in the context of this *secret*, forbidden relationship that their love for one another can develop – out of sight of the censure of the society in which they lived. It is within such relationships that ‘The world-out-there, the normative social structure with its roles and rules, expectations and obligations, can be laid aside as the couple constructs a world-in-here, a world freer of normative social constraint and cultural definitions’ (Richardson, 1988: 212). The ‘world-in-here’ for Jack and Ennis allowed them to express their love for one another. After spending the night together in a hotel room, Jack exclaims, ‘Old Brokeback got us good and it sure ain’t over. We gotta work out what the fuck we’re goin a do now’ (Proulx, 2006: 299).

While an indispensably important aspect of the relationship of Jack and Ennis, it is here suggested that sex alone would be insufficient to sustain such a protracted and sporadic interaction. Jack confesses: ‘Count the damn few times we been together in twenty years...then tell me you’ll kill me for needin it and not hardly never getting it...I can’t

make it on a couple of high-altitude fucks once or twice a year' (Proulx, 2006: 309). If sex is insufficient, and the processes of mutual disclosure and trust are all but absent, what has kept the relationship of Jack and Ennis alive and so vital between the once or twice per year fishing and hunting trips that they make together? A shared identity, a lack of happiness and the submission to the same external criteria solidified the relationship of Jack and Ennis so that these features become both 'symbolic of and reflexively constitutive of the relationship itself' (Jamieson, 1999: 490). The possibility of a pure relationship is all but lost, for 'intimacy is the other face of privacy, or at least only becomes possible (or desired) given substantial privacy' (Giddens, 1992: 94). Despite the impossibility of their relationship, it was the love that Jack and Ennis felt for one another that drew them together over all those miles and years. At one of their last meetings, Jack said, 'You're too much for me, Ennis, you son of a whoreson bitch. I wish I knew how to quit you' (Proulx, 2006: 309). Jack wasn't able to quit Ennis – he was attacked and killed before he could.

One of the friends of the quasi-autobiographical protagonist in *Calendar Boy*, when describing the process of meeting someone new as a potential sexual partner, stated, 'You stare at strangers you like, and if they stare back, then you go up and talk to them' (Quan, 2001: 159). This friend is then revealed as the person who was 'the start of my great education on how to be gay – not the self-acceptance part, which I was already quite good at – but the *men* part' (Quan, 2001: 159). This protagonist of *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) learns from his friend, that the *men* part of being gay is as simple as communicating that you're available for sex and it all takes off from there. The outcome of this education, as this protagonist begins to develop a relationship with a new person, is the surprise of waiting until a second date before sex with this new person: 'Since I usually sleep with men on the first date, or sleep with them before I make a first date, I thought it was a good start' (Quan, 2001: 218). As a reflection of the changing attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviour in late modernity, this character in *Calendar Boy* performs very well. He represents in many ways the emerging interpretations of 'plastic sexuality' (Giddens, 1992) and the breaking of ties with traditional modes of love and sexuality.

These attitudes may be described in the following way:

Sexual development and sexual satisfaction henceforth became bound to the reflexive project of the self...Sexuality has then become, as Luhmann (Love as Passion, Cambridge, Polity, 1986) might put it, a 'communicative code' rather than a phenomenon integrated with the wider exigencies of human experience. In sexual behaviour, a distinction had always been drawn between pleasure and procreation. When the new connections between sexuality and intimacy were formed, however, sexuality became much more completely separated from procreation than before. Sexuality became doubly-constituted as a medium of self-realisation and as a prime means, as well as an expression, of intimacy. Sexuality here has lost its extrinsic connections with wider traditions and ethics, as well as with the succession of the generations. Sexuality remains, or rather becomes, a central focus for 'experience', and the word 'experience' comes to have a particular significance in relation to sexual life. Yet this 'experience' has little to do with the existential domains with which sex in some sense places us in contact. (Giddens, 1992: 164)

The 'experience' of sex in the relationship of John and Tim in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995) is elemental to their reflexive projects of self.

## **2. The crisis of self-realisation**

Jack's bravado and Ennis' taciturnity in  *Brokeback Mountain*  (Proulx, 2006) belie the same thing: a belief that somehow they have made the wrong decision regarding their sexual identity, or at least the outworking of this identity is something of which to be ashamed. Ennis said: 'You know, I was sitting up here all the time trying to figure out if I was ---? I know I ain't' (Proulx, 2006: 298). This was 1967, and sociologists of the time rallied against a heterosexist formulation of homosexuality as 'deviance' (Stein & Plummer, 1994), helping to reframe the ways in which sociologists approached theorizing about homosexuality (Stein & Plummer, 1994). In developing their sociological approach to homosexuality, for example, Simon and Gagnon (1967) argue



for a new approach to uncovering the aetiology of homosexuality: 'It is our current feeling that the problem of finding out how people become homosexual requires an adequate theory of how they become heterosexual; that is, one cannot explain homosexuality in one way and leave heterosexuality as a large residual category labelled 'all other' (Simon & Gagnon, 1967: 179). Mary McIntosh (1968) questions the utility of even searching for this aetiology, given the resounding failure of attempts to do so (McIntosh, 1968: 183). McIntosh describes the thinking of the period as characterising the homosexual as one who bears an effeminate nature, and is effeminate in sexual proclivities, necessarily infusing sexuality into all his activities, and is attracted exclusively to boys and young men (McIntosh, 1968: 185). If this then is the nascence of homosexuality not as a 'condition' (McIntosh, 1968; Stein & Plummer, 1994), it is little wonder that two ranch hands in 1967 Wyoming would feel the oppression of a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). In fact, Jack and Ennis found their attraction difficult to narrate to themselves, and one another:

'They never talked about the sex, let it happen...no lack of noises, but saying not a goddamn word except once Ennis said, 'I'm not no queer,' and Jack jumped in with 'Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours.'  
(Proulx, 2006: 291)

In the social context of the time, it is hardly surprising that Jack and Ennis would have expressed this self-criticism.

An important question to ask in this context is whether the battles of the advocates of *gay liberation*, to give the movement its broadest context, have actually achieved that which surely must have underpinned the whole movement: the liberation of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and people of transgender from their own self-criticism. The modern gay scene is a result of the self-assertion of the gay liberation movement in the early 1970s (Cruikshank, 1992). The primary impetus of this movement was to establish that issues of gender and sexuality were neither natural nor unnatural, but that sexual liberation must transcend these categories (Cruikshank, 1992).

It is comprehensible that Ennis, in 1983, would not embrace Jack 'face to face because he did not want to see nor feel that it was Jack he held' (Proulx, 2006: 311). It is clear that in the context of *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006) 'the external criteria' have not been dissolved (Giddens, 1991: 6). Many of these criteria hinge upon the self-perception of same-sex attracted men when it comes to sex. In the case of Jack and Ennis, their own shame regarding their sexual relationship figured enormously in their perceptions of themselves and of one another. Ennis did not want to admit that it was another *man* that he embraced. Largely, the project of self upon which he had embarked in the context of his relationship with Jack, was interrupted by the shame he felt about their sexual acts together. In the sexual relationship of Jack and Ennis it is evident that 'shame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography' (Giddens, 1992: 65). At once, this shame is generated from within the individual, but is also constituted by external criteria.

While on one hand, secrecy may function to open up sites for intimacy and love in 'forbidden sexual relationships' (Richardson, 1988: 210), on the other, secrets and secrecy may function to hide characteristics that do not accord with an acceptable public image (Simmel [1908] 1950, in Richardson, 1988), thereby generating shame. And secrecy can also aggravate and distort relations between the couple in question, in private and in public. For example, the women in Richardson's study always had more to lose in maintaining a secret affair, than did the men.

For Tim Conigrave, this doubly-constituted shame became apparent at an early age. Some of his earliest experiences of shame are associated with his teachers in junior school:

At Christmas, she gave each of us a crucifix made of foiled glass. As she handed me mine she said, 'You don't deserve this because you are wicked.' ...She got into my head at the age when I was loading the operating system that forms self-image. (Conigrave, 1995: 3)

In Tim's interactions with broader society, these internally-generated feelings of shame begin to tincture everything. Even in an otherwise amenable interaction with a 'dear

old lady' (Conigrave, 1995: 15) whose path he crossed as part of his work, Tim thought, 'I wonder if she can see that I have a heart heavy with sin?' (Conigrave, 1995: 15). The point at which Tim concedes these feelings are the heaviest, is the situation in which he decides to talk with his family about his relationship with John. The revealing of the totality of this relationship, especially its sexual aspects, did not prompt a positive response: 'I was shell shocked. I should have felt the lifting of a burden from my shoulders but all I felt was shame. And I could see storm clouds gathering on the horizon' (Conigrave, 1995: 103).

For Jack and Ennis, what came of the crisis of self-realisation was a fleeting sense of invincibility. When they were together, Ennis 'felt he could paw the white out of the moon' (Proulx, 2006: 289), and after the initial parting it took Ennis 'about a year a figure out it was that I shouldn't let you [Jack] out a my sights' (Proulx, 2006: 299). At the same time, however, regret about that which might have been overcomes these positive feelings. Despite Jack's entreaties to Ennis to move to Denver and start their lives together in the relative security and anonymity a larger city affords, Ennis would not. For Jack the consequent unhappiness is represented in his regret: 'Tell you what, we could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life' (Proulx, 2006: 309). For Ennis, his life away from Jack is a process of unsatisfying intimate relationships culminating in divorce and estrangement from his daughters. In the end, it has been in many ways, the faltering project of self, and in particular, their crises of self-realisation, that has kept Jack and Ennis apart. In their fractured relationship, mediated largely by the expectations of society at the time, and the dangers of being open about their love for one another, Jack and Ennis do not have the capacity to realise a pure relationship, and are therefore restricted in self-understanding:

The pure relationship is a key environment for building the reflexive project of the self, since it both allows for and demands organised and continuous self-understanding – the means of securing a durable tie to the other. (Giddens, 1992: 186)

For Tim Conigrave, however, it was precisely the crisis of self-realisation, that he was gay and that he loved John no matter what, that was a counterpoint to the 'storm clouds

gathering.' After John was injured in a football accident, Tim reflects: 'One afternoon we were lying on the bed and I started to think how it would have been if John had had brain damage, or had his leg amputated. I knew I would still love him. And so I told him' (Conigrave, 1995: 102). This realisation of love, the intimacy and confidence this brings, along with its many challenges, provides Tim with the capacity to shape that which the storm clouds represent. In this way, Tim and John point to the possibility that 'social circumstances are not separate from personal life, nor are they just an external environment to them. In struggling with intimate problems, individuals help actively to reconstruct the universe of social activity around them' (Giddens, 1992: 12). In the simplest sense, Tim and John surround themselves by people who think and act in ways similar to them. In a symbolic sense, it is their enduring relationship which provides security and safety in often difficult social circumstances. This enduring relationship is based in love - many of their questions about sex and intimacy resolved in love.

On the other hand, the shame that this realisation of sexuality brings points to the possibility that 'the stigma of the homosexual is unique in one central sense. Our gayness is not something, like skin color, or sex, or infirmity, immediately apparent to both us and others' (Altman, 1993: 117). There are resonances, for example, throughout the early part of *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) especially, of the stigma of being Chinese as foremost in the mind of the storyteller, with the stigma attached to being gay and Chinese, further in the background. In a sense, however, the recognition of one stigma informs the other, so that in a cyclical fashion, the overcoming of one stigma is necessarily accompanied by the destruction of the other. The process is the natural antidote to the ascription of stigma, a process by which 'an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us' (Goffman, 1963: 5). Just as the ascription of stigma may overshadow other attributes, so the divesting of stigma opens new possibilities for self-construction. When, for example, the twenty-one-year-old protagonist gets photographed with a shirtless body-builder at the 1990 Gay Games in Vancouver, a 'funny Chinese kid with a smug smile, arm around the shoulders of a tanned mass of taut muscle' (Quan, 2001: 9), the realisation follows closely:

While I was flirting with him (Jeremy, the body-builder), so obviously that it wasn't obvious to me, he was flirting with me, a skinny Chinese kid who never imagined that someone that looked like all his fantasies could ever be interested in him (Quan, 2001: 10).

The crisis of identity or the realisation that homosexuality always has an attached stigma, seems to take a different form in this experience from that which Altman (1993) describes: it is not just about being gay that interrupts positive self-identity formation. Other seemingly integral parts of being a same-sex attracted man, and the fetishisation of body image, have enormous influence over the process of identity formation. Further attention is given to this point later in the chapter, but for now it is important to recognise how these processes align with what Goffman describes as the 'basic dialectic' (Goffman, 1959: 243): while individuals expend great effort in maintaining the impression that they are meeting the standards expected of them, as performers, the most important task is 'engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized' (Goffman, 1959: 243).

If the realisation 'that my homosexuality is an integral part of my self-identity' (Altman, 1993: 117) is so difficult, as is suggested by Ennis Del Mar in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006), and that 'life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self' (Giddens, 1992: 75), what can be done to 'fix it' (Proulx, 2006, 318)? It is possible, at least for a large part, to reconfigure what it actually means to be gay. In the relative austerity and conservatism of a small university town in Canada, the quasi-autobiographical protagonist of *Calendar Boy* comes to an arrangement for this reconfiguration:

No matter how small or isolated a place like Peterborough was, I was determined that here I would learn what it was to be gay, what it meant to fall in love with another man (Quan, 2001: 18).

There are striking convergences in the narratives of the protagonists in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006) and *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001). It could be argued that Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006) were in fact in love, accorded with the

traits that we generally recognise as belonging to the state of being in love: desperately wanting and needing to spend time together, healthy sex life and, for the greater part, an ignorance to the pressures of anything other than one's desire for the other. What distinguishes Jack and Ennis, however, from the quasi-autobiographical protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001), is that the pressure of the 'external criteria' (Giddens, 1991), social opprobrium for example, is not so great in the case of the latter. When combined, the perspectives of the major actors in this analysis are not that temporally distally located. The actor in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) is speaking as a twenty-one-year old in 1990; at the point at which Jack makes his final entreaty to Ennis to come and live with him, the year is 1983; and Altman (1993) is writing about New York in the mid 1990s. Admittedly, 1983 in Wyoming would be quite different from 1993 New York, but interestingly, the perspectives of the actors in these two places are most similar. Altman may easily represent himself, Jack and Ennis when he says:

Like most gay people, I know myself to be part of a minority feared, disliked and persecuted by the majority and this gives my life a complexity and an extra dimension unknown to straights. (Altman, 1993: 117)

Thus, the way in which the quasi-autobiographical protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) views love and gay male intimate relationships is presented as a means for overcoming the dark fears in the development of gay male self-identity. So far it has been suggested that it is the realisation of the sexual aspects of being gay that can bring shame into the reflexive project of self, having a deleterious effect on the development of self-identity. It has been argued that this effect is not necessarily temporally located, as it is present in the lives of Jack and Ennis as much as it is contained within the quasi-autobiographical story of *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001). In this way, it is possible to see that 'sexuality both repudiates and, and gives substantive form to the involvement of human beings with morally transcendent conditions and experiences' (Giddens, 1992: 205). Secondly, these responsibilities are both constituted and constitutive of the self-referential nature of the relationships engendered by trust and intimacy. As Giddens describes:

Yet pure relationships, and the nexus of intimacy in which they are involved, create enormous burdens for the integrity of the self. In-so-far-as a relationship lacks external referents, it is morally mobilized only through 'authenticity': the authentic person is one who knows herself and is able to reveal that knowledge to the other, discursively and in the behavioural sphere. To be in an authentic relation with another can be a major source of moral support, again largely because of its potential integration with basic trust. But shorn of external moral criteria, the pure relationship is vulnerable as a source of security at fateful moments and at other major life transitions. (Giddens, 1992: 186-7)

It may be observed that representations of intimate relationships in 1960s Wyoming do not necessarily accord with the understanding of 'pure relationships' in contemporary times. What is argued here, however, is that the process and crisis of self-realisation can be identified by the authenticity that may be derived from encounters with 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991: 187). These 'fateful moments' are 'times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences' (Giddens, 1991: 113). These moments then constitute the connection between the narratives of all of these characters: for Jack and Ennis, the realisation that they find their sexual relationship in many ways shameful; and, for Tim and the *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) character most closely representing the author's own narrative, the realisation that being gay was to fall in love with another man. Furthermore, all of these characters experience a crisis as a result of these 'fateful moments', keenly felt as a crisis of self-realisation, within which 'each phase of transition tends to become an identity crisis – and is often reflexively known to the individual as such' (Giddens, 1992: 148). 'Fateful moments' (Giddens, 1992: 148) also produce a state of reflection, especially involving intimate relationships (Smart, 2007), a state characterised by profound consideration of the importance and influence of these relationships (Smart, 2007), crucially contributing to the construction of one's own personal narratives.

### 3. The 'pure relationship'

Little has been said so far regarding the psychological aspects of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991: 6), but these aspects are impossible to ignore for several reasons. Firstly, according to Giddens, 'pure relationships' are an extension of the stability of a happy and successful childhood, reconfiguring the trust of a child in their caretaker into the trust an individual should have in their intimate relationships (1992: 186). Secondly, it is at this dependence on a particular psychological discourse that many criticisms of Giddens' (1991; 1992) account of social change is levelled (Craib, 1994; 1997). Thirdly, if the adult 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991: 6) is in some way a replication of a happy and secure childhood, and intimate relationships are the 'key site' (Jamieson, 1999: 479) of 'self-exploration and moral construction' (Giddens, 1992: 144), the corollary suggests that adult self-knowledge is almost wholly based on childhood experiences. The following observation will be challenged: that Giddens (1991; 1992) 'draws selectively from psychological theory, setting aside accounts which emphasise the inevitability of inner conflict, self-discontent and disappointment in relationships' (Jamieson, 1999: 479). Craib (1994, 1997) made a similar observation. The challenge lies in an analysis of the process of gaining self-knowledge through intimate relationships that characterises the development of 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1991: 6).

It is not suggested that intimate relationships are without some disappointments, as Giddens describes: It is not surprising that rage, anger and depressive feelings swirl through the contexts of pure relationships and, in concrete circumstances, intimacy may be psychically more troubling than it is rewarding (1991: 187). Despite Craib's (1994; 1997) and Jamieson's (1999) assertion, Giddens' formulation of the 'pure relationship' includes the exigencies of intimate relationships. These exigencies are exemplified in the relationship of Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006). It is not so much perhaps that, it would be expected that two ranch hands in 1963 Wyoming could be openly-embracing of their love for one another and make the necessary lifestyle choices to promote their own happiness, for it is clear that the risk of serious consequences, including death, from the external criteria (Giddens, 1991) was too great. Nor is it so surprising that the mutual disclosure and trust Giddens (1991) identifies as



being the core elements of a 'pure relationship' are all but absent from the relationship of Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 2006). Many of the difficulties they face, however, could potentially be attributed to lifestyle choices in the sense that Jack had identified an escape – a way for he and Ennis to live without the fear of vilification. They would need to move away from the parochialism of rural Montana to an urban centre such as Denver. Through the constant negotiation of life-style options, Giddens suggests, the individual not only demonstrates the 'marginal aspects of the individual's attitudes, but define(s) who the individual 'is' (Giddens, 1992: 75). Further, Giddens claims, 'life-style choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self' (1992: 75). More pessimistic observers may argue, if only it were that simple. There was a 'lifestyle choice' open to Jack and Ennis – Jack made this very clear – but Ennis was not able to include this in his narrative of self. As Ennis saw it in 1983: 'There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it you've got to stand it' (Proulx, 2006: 318).

As previously discussed, Giddens suggests that in negotiating intimate relationships, individuals also 'reconstruct the universe of social activity around them' (1991: 12). Contention may therefore here be made against the assertions of Craib (1994; 1997) and Jamieson (1999). The 'pure relationship' does not preclude inner conflict and tension, either about the relationship or the universe of social activity more generally. Rather, inherent in the 'pure relationship' is the possibility of disappointments and finality, one of the catalysts for which may include mismatched lifestyle choices. Recognition of these tensions is imperative for both participants in the relationship, as the tensions are partly constitutive of the relationship itself:

Moreover, the pure relationship contains internal tensions and even contradictions. By definition, it is a social relation which can be terminated at will, and is only sustained in so far as it generates sufficient psychic returns for each individual. On the one hand it demands commitment, not only to the other individual, but to the social relation itself: this is again intrinsic to the pure relationship. On the other hand, the relationship can be voluntarily broken, and is acknowledged by both parties to be only 'good until further notice'. The possibility of

dissolution, perhaps willingly brought about by the individual in question, forms part of the very horizon of commitment. (Giddens, 1991: 186-7)

While it may be seen that Jack and Ennis had great difficulties in maintaining intimacy in their relationship, and as consequence, gaining self-knowledge, there is also the possibility that 'pure relationships' may aid an individual understand him or herself in a more comprehensive way. In this way, the 'pure relationship' has confluence with the ideals of therapy. As Giddens describes:

The rise of therapy is closely tied to the emergence of the pure relationship, but not only, or even primarily, because therapeutic work can help heal the psychological damage which such relationships can bring about. The centrality of therapy expresses the fact that the more that pure relationships become dominant, the more crucial becomes an in-depth understanding which allows one to feel 'all right' with oneself. For self-mastery is the condition of that opening-out process through which hope (commitment) and trust are generated in the pure relationship. (Giddens 1991: 186)

Rather than drawing 'selectively from psychological theory' (Jamieson, 1999), Giddens (1991) augments the ideals of therapy with the constitutive features of 'pure relationships.' This alignment is a key for fulfilling intimate relationships because of its relationship with mutual trust and disclosure. Importantly too, the tenets of therapeutic theory align closely with the outcomes of 'pure relationships': the gaining of knowledge about oneself and the people around one. This process is observable in the relationship of one of the characters of *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001). It is in this relationship that some of the 'tantalising aspects' (Jamieson, 1999: 479) of the 'pure relationship' are seen: that there is the possibility of finding real and lasting love and intimacy. The last person whom this protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) meets is Neal, someone with whom what at first appears to be the promise of a lasting intimate relationship is shared. The relationship lasts three weeks. During these three weeks, this protagonist in *Calendar Boy* wants to ask Neal:

Is there a Romeo out there, or many Romeos? How many love aspects in a given astrological chart? What combination of physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional is found in his affairs and relationships? Does he measure or guess the right amount of each one? (Quan, 2001: 220)

The reader discovers that Neal is no Romeo. The quasi-autobiographical protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) sees a Romeo as being the balance of physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional. As seen earlier the men part is not only about positive self-identity or self-acceptance (Quan, 2001: 159). It is therefore suggested that the men part is more likely to be largely constitutive of positive intimate relationships. Similarly, in *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995), Tim too dreams of what it is to understand himself as a man:

‘It’s time to become a man, to find your fire, your strength.’ He places the towel around my waist and pulls me toward him. ‘Your strength is in this.’ He places his mouth on mine and I am charged. I am strong, I am a man. We sink into the water. I am cocooned. I am whole. (Conigrave, 1995: 16)

In these two accounts, the possibilities of therapy and the ‘pure relationship’ coalesce. The account of the quasi-autobiographical protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) resonates with the optimism of the potential of ‘pure relationships’ (Giddens, 1991), ‘one of the tantalising aspects of Giddens’s work’ (Jamieson, 1999: 479). Contained within this optimism is the emergence of ‘a more profound equality’ (Jamieson, 1999: 479) between all people and that this equality is dependent on the transformation of intimacy (Jamieson, 1999). Giddens describes the ‘radicalising possibilities of the transformation of intimacy’ (Giddens, 1992: 3) as the product of ‘a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals’ (Giddens, 1992: 3). This protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) sees the accomplishment of a balance between physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional as the desired state - the state of finding one’s Romeo.

Jack and Ennis, Tim and John and the protagonist in *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001), despite being separated by time and distance, have much in common. Each is searching for

intimacy under difficult circumstances, whether under the prejudice and violence of society more broadly, or the shame that is felt so keenly. Positive narratives of self are so difficult to draw and maintain under these conditions. Yet, all these characters hunger for intimacy. We see this so clearly in all their stories, but this is often complicated by issues of sex and sexual identity. For Jack and Ennis, things did not work out. They should have moved to Denver, but Jack was murdered. For Tim and John, however, something kept them together, resolved their confusions around sex and intimacy, and after the ravages of AIDS, meant that Tim was with John until his last day. For Tim and John, this lynchpin was love, as indeed it was for many of my participants facing similar challenges. In the next chapter, we explore their narratives, examining how these men talked about sex and intimacy in their lives. When reflecting on the significance sex and intimacy, respondents sometimes present these as conflicting imperatives and we examine the significance of love in resolving these contradictions. What also becomes visible in this analysis is the resonance between the themes identified in the foregoing exploration of fictive texts and the real-life relationship scenarios my respondents construct from their own experiences.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### The 'Scene'



#### **The 'scene:' Looking for love in a dangerous place**

The previous chapter examined the stories of sex, love and intimacy in the autobiographical and fictive texts, *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995), *Calendar Boy* (Quan, 2001) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2006). Love was identified as a lynchpin that held Tim and John together, despite tremendous adversity. In this chapter, we focus upon the 'scene,' or the features the participants in this study associate with living connectedly with other gay people. The 'scene' is described as both exciting and dangerous, but a common thread for all the participants is the search for intimacy and love in a place that can be very emotionally risky. The participants ascribe sex with different meanings, using it to highlight how relations within the 'scene' become confounded. The often-precarious nature of these relations results in confusion over sex and intimacy. Love was described by participants as one way of resolving the apparent contradictions in these seemingly competing desires. Participants spoke about the desire to find their Romeo, 'the one,' in ways which suggested this pursuit was very important for them, even when this may not end very well.

In the past forty years or so there have been many wins for gay communities. In many, and some unexpected, jurisdictions around the world, marriage equality is guaranteed by the state in law (finally in Australia in December 2017). Indeed, in many such jurisdictions, the state protects equal rights for its gay citizens by way of legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexuality. On the one hand these guaranteed freedoms have invigorated debates about how to be a good, gay 'normal citizen' (Richardson, 2004), and what it might mean for gays to attain 'first-class citizenship' (Seidman, 2004: 183). On the other hand, as participants in this study reported, the 'inner' struggle in finding intimacy and even love perhaps, rages on as before. Participants in this study reported looking for sources of connection and belonging in a

‘scene’ that was ‘emotionally dangerous.’ They describe how intimacy is a much-coveted, yet difficult to attain, prize. Loving relationships were, however, described even in the context of the difficulties of the ‘scene.’

Finding one’s Romeo is still a complicated business. While rainbow flags festoon lampposts, balconies and windows in inner-ring suburbs of big cities and broad scale ‘acceptance’ of sexual diversity is a given in Western contexts, the personal issue of intimacy and love is still a difficult terrain to negotiate. One participant described the competing interests in the following way:

Now I tend to find kind of intimate relationships, having conversations with people, working on some social justice causes as more what defines what’s important. So, the idea of being fabulous and beautiful, and having the time of your life, it kind of just fades away. And maybe because I’ve sort of been there done that as well. I don’t know. And now I just don’t think too much about it - different priorities now in life. And those scenes are quite in some ways, are transitory. It’s a good experience I guess maybe to have, *but it doesn’t and it can’t define and sustain a life* [emphasis added]. (Mike)

This thesis reports on how ten gay men in Australia talk about navigating this terrain. These men came from a diversity of economic, educational and social backgrounds, but they all found deep resonances between their lives and times and the stories in  *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995). The participants are profiled in alphabetical order. Pseudonyms are used.

## **Participant profiles**

### ***Art***

Art, now in his mid-40s, was born in Canada and lived most of his life in Ontario. A month before the most recent interview, Art had been in Canada with his Australian partner. They got married during this visit. Art has university qualifications and worked for many years for an AIDS advocacy organisation. He is presently freelancing as a writer and editor and resides in one of the so-called gay ‘ghettoes’ of Sydney. In

responding to the interview questions, Art often referred back to his ethnic-minority status as a frame through which he examined his childhood and coming-out story.

### ***Ben***

Ben, now in his mid-50s, is a registered nurse. He worked for many years in the hospital system with a particular focus on mental health and drug and alcohol treatment. He was well-connected with these health networks in Sydney, but currently resides in a regional area with his partner. Ben also worked for some time for an AIDS organisation, as a drug and alcohol counsellor. He often frames his interview responses within the context of his work as a counsellor, providing vignettes from his practice to illustrate his main points. He focused on the day-to-day for the men whom he counselled, rather than any more philosophical approaches to treatment.

### ***Dave***

Dave is also in his mid-50s and is Australian born. He currently cares full-time for his former partner who is now extremely unwell as a result of 20 or so years with HIV. Dave comes from a working-class background, growing up in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Sydney. He worked for many years in disability care, but needed to give that up to care for his former partner. Dave lives in another gay ghetto in Sydney. He reflects on his participation in the original 1978 Mardi Gras parade when framing many of his responses in the interview.

### ***Josh***

Josh is in his early-30s and is also a registered nurse. Josh lives in a regional area about two hours' drive from Sydney. He had worked for an escort agency while he was studying, saying it was fun, the wages were high and it fitted well with his study schedule. Josh likes to party occasionally, and says he has never been in a relationship, despite describing a very intimate relationship he once had with a fellow escort. He often frames his responses around some of the prejudice he feels directed towards him because of the regional culture.

### ***Keegan***

Keegan is in his early-40s. He is originally from Sydney, where he now resides in yet another enclave that is very popular with gay men. Keegan also spent much of his life in Melbourne with his former partner. He is an architect and had recently redesigned his own home. Keegan was single at the time of most recent interview, but said he was having a few casual sexual encounters from time to time. He spoke at length about how important it was to him that no-one got hurt as a result of any kind of sexual encounters, and how important it was to try and be friends with former partners.

### ***Kelvin***

Kelvin is in his early-30s and moved to Sydney from a regional area just after the interview. Kelvin is also a registered nurse with a Masters degree in his speciality. He currently works in a prison. Kelvin was single at the time of the interview, but had reported that he had had about five serious relationships in the past. He mentioned that he received great support from former and current work colleagues. Like Keegan, Kelvin spoke about how important it was to behave in way that meant no-one was hurt.

### ***Mike***

In his mid-30s, Mike worked for an AIDS organisation at the time of interview. Mike had originally trained as a health professional, but moved over to advocacy and promotions saying it was a field he enjoyed far more. Like Art, Mike reflected on his ethnic-minority status in framing his coming-out story. Mike spoke at great length about many things, one of which was the fragmenting of the romance story due to technology, , for example. Mike lamented the loss of face-to-face hook-ups. He was in a relationship at the time of interview.

### ***Phillip***

Phillip, now almost 40, is a senior executive at an accounting firm. He works in corporate restructure. Phillip comes from a materially-privileged background, having attended, for a time, one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the country. At the time of interview, Phillip resided in Sydney, but in the last few years, work has taken him to another state capital. He spoke at length about his desire to do things differently



from everyone else. Phillip has been in a relationship with the same man for the past fifteen years.

### ***Rich and Matt***

Rich and Matt were interviewed as a couple. Both in their 50s, Rich is a little older than Matt. Both had spent their formative years in Sydney, but in the last few years had moved interstate to the fringe of a regional city in order to start a business and purchase a house. Rich and Matt had disparate coming-out stories, with Rich coming out to his family in his teens, whereas, Matt has never broached the subject with his family, although his sister and brother know that he is gay, and married to Rich. Matt comes from an ethnically-diverse background, and he focuses on this when talking about not being out to his parents. Ethnic diversity forms a large part of his story. Rich had previously worked in the first AIDS ward in Sydney at the time at which Tim and John would have been in-patients there.

All participants reported feeling at times, conflicted over their sexuality and their intimate relationships in the context of broader society. As Mike, one of the participants pointed out: 'I wanna connect. I wanna feel belonging in this group or community, but I don't.' And, 'What's wrong?' you know. 'Why is it so hard?' 'Why is it so difficult?' 'Why am I judged or discriminated against?' Mike's statement about wanting to connect resonates with other participants' responses in this study who explained that even with greater freedoms and recognition, the 'scene' can get in the way. Kelvin says, for example:

I think things are more open nowadays...there's a lot more freedom and wot-not, but with that comes the expansion of that scene and, you know...the superficial side of things, the instant gratification, the sex, the drugs, fun, fun, fun lifestyle...people lose track of what everything's really about. (Kelvin)

As Steven Seidman has pointed out, 'with the decline of the closet, the battleground shifts' (Seidman, 2004: 183). Here Seidman is talking about moving on from visibility to equality across all domains of public life. One such domain may include, for example,

marriage equality, which Keegan suggested characterised this complicated relationship between broader societal acceptance and what's going on in gay men's inner worlds:

They want to marginalize us and keep it as, keep us as drug-taking disco bunnies, cause they're happy with us on that pedestal, but once we, you know, ironically become assimilated, they don't want us there, because it's too real. (Keegan)

Arguably, Keegan's reference to the 'too real' relates to the broader acknowledgement of the same rights to love among gay men in intimate partner relationships that straight couples enjoy. Keegan's claim is an expression of the often-dismissed elements of gay men's relationships in favour of the 'homosexual/queer spectacle' (Hennessy, 1994-1995: 66). This point is taken up further in the conclusion, along with a discussion of recent changes to legislation securing marriage equality in Australia. Participants identified other elements of the 'scene,' suggesting that it was an alienating place for them. For Kelvin, for example, describes the relentless pursuit of new sexual conquests in the context of 'open' relationships as soulless:

All of the ones [open relationships] I've know, there seems to be something missing. It's almost like it's no different to me and my friend being out and partying and, if we were to have a relationship. But that's, how I view it. I think it's, it's almost soulless. I don't know. And, when you've got two people there that are in an open relationship and you openly see them out and about, and doing their thing, and I've been hit up a few times by a particular couple in Oxford Street and it just, I don't know, it's almost disheartening sometimes. I don't know. It's a hard one. (Kelvin)

Other participants talked about changes they had observed in the 'scene,' making it superficial:

I think that people have forgotten how to be happy. Certainly, in the community, and they don't know how to be themselves now. They come into the scene, they either like it or they don't or they find the cliquy

niche and they stay with it and go with it. A lot of people are very shallow out there. That's what I find. (Dave)

There is also a sense here that Dave is lamenting that the 'community' was not what it once was. He identified the arrival of HIV as the origin of the gym culture, where many gay men sought muscularity as a defence against suspicion of being infected with HIV. Dave's personal narrative corresponds with larger studies at the time (Davidson, 1991; Kowalewski, 1988) that suggested that gay men used barriers such as self-concept, or health status, to protect themselves against HIV. More contemporary research (Drummond, 2005) suggests that young gay men, may be particularly susceptible to mental health issues because of the 'physical-aesthetic-driven culture in which they exist' (Drummond, 2005: 270). Either way, the drive for an aesthetically-pleasing body appears to be yet another potentially-damaging element of the 'scene.'

Other participants saw this differently. These were in the minority, and their analysis of the 'scene' hinged upon what some might consider to be a more commodified version of queer (Hennessy, 1994-1995). For example, when talking about how younger gay people seemed less civically engaged, Art said, 'You know, now they've got gay marriage and 'Queer as Folk' and 'Will and Grace' and everything. Young people talk about it, it's a much different world.' Nonetheless, for many participants in this study, the 'scene' remains a dangerous place, filled with inequalities, and disappointments. Kelvin goes on to say:

...this lifestyle that just is glorious and it's fun...it's crazy, and it's sexy, and it's wot-not, but it's so damaging. Like it's just so damaging... it's happened to me and I was devastated. So, I've never understood how someone can do it. Like be so careless about what they're doing. And I think it's rampant in that 'scene.' Like yeah, it's a very dangerous place, emotionally, yes. (Kelvin)

Here, Kelvin is recounting the time he slept with a man, not knowing this lover actually had a partner, and then finding out only later that the whole affair with Kelvin had been a secret. For Kelvin, both the attraction of the 'scene', and the alienating aspects of the 'scene' stem from the highly-sexualised nature of the relations within it:

...there's a huge element of sex. 'Let's go out ...' Like, when you're a single gay man, you go out, you take drugs, party, you're drinking and you're looking at people, you're dancing with them...making out with them on the floor, you go home with them, you know. I do that now...it's all these hot guys dancing around you and you go to *The Arq* or wot-not and there's all these beautiful boys with their shirts off...it's extremely sexualised and it's, you know, use them at your disposal. (Kelvin)

This is a repeat theme for Kelvin who describes the 'scene' as a 'chew them up, spit them out' approach to sexual relations, in a relentless search for the next best thing:

... it's a very superficial scene...they're all looking for the next best thing. They all wanna go out. They all wanna look sexy. They all wanna pick up someone hot, you know...It becomes all about this: I want more, I want it now, I want this, I want that instead of taking a step back and keeping life in perspective of what things are about, and cherishing things that are special, are almost sacred, you know. (Kelvin)

Similarly, Ben relates a story about one of his clients whom he had been counselling about his problematic substance use and extensive sexual hook-ups. The client realised that he was not finding what he wanted:

It becomes a bit too real when you just wanna dance, fuck and, and take drugs. It's a real conversation...So it took him a while to get used to that [realisation] and then we were, he was reflecting on, on what it was like at the time, and went back to that, you know, 'I was chasing something but it wasn't, it wasn't fulfilling, it wasn't satisfying.' (Ben)

### **The quest for intimacy**

Yet even within this superficial 'scene,' gay men are apparently also searching for intimacy. It has also been suggested that gay men are frequently able to separate sex and intimacy, and casual sexual encounters do not therefore pose a threat to intimate partners (Jamieson, 1998). Under these conditions, casual sex 'scenes' thrive, while

other research suggests that gay men want 'lasting intimate sexual relationships' (Jamieson, 1998). In the absence of these lasting relationships, many men will 'make-do' with casual sexual hook-ups (Connell, 1995; Jamieson, 1998). The stories of the participants in this study, with specific reference to the narratives around casual sexual encounters, may illuminate these points further. Matt and Rich, for example, who were married some years ago, offer an insight into how they perceive society sees them:

Rich: I think exactly what you said too [in relation to how society perceives gay men's sexuality]. I think it also gave this message that we're very free and easy, and we have multiple partners, and, you know, we go to saunas, we go to all these venues just to get sex.

Matt: But not, not everyone does that. There's a percentage of people that do that in the world. *I've never been to a sauna in my life* [emphasis added].

It is almost as if Matt and Rich, Matt especially, feel a need to make a statement about the nature of their relationship to counter what they see as perhaps a negative stereotype of gay men's sexuality. When reflecting upon this stereotype, Keegan thinks back to the depiction of Tim and John's relationship in  *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995), in which Tim wanted to have an 'open' relationship, and John did not. Keegan describes this depiction as fulfilling a stereotype on the one hand, but demonstrating that this is not for everyone, on the other:

I think that would possibly just confirm what people's view are on gay relationships. That gay men are promiscuous. The nice part about it, if that is what people think, is that they see one [John] doesn't want that. So, it's not a mutual thing...not everyone wants to have a relationship with that. So, if that's what they thought, which is what I assume they might have thought, then I think it's equally plausible that they could then see that one didn't want it as well. Unfortunately, I think they would probably just see, oh yeah, you know, they want to fuck around...which would be disappointing. But it is part of our - you know, of how things work.  
(Keegan)

Josh also expresses uncertainty about why there is a particular image of gay, particularly male, relationships:

I always thought it was strange that in gay relationships and I suppose in, you know, straight relationships, it happens as well, but I always thought the threesome thing and open relationships was very strange. (Josh)

Matt accounts for his own misgivings about this picture of gay male intimate relationships in the following way:

And, if you're happy in your relationship, why would you even want to explore? There will be no need to explore that avenue. If your relationship, if you're happy in your relationship and it fulfils you, and it gives you whatever you want, well you wouldn't be looking for something else. (Matt)

Kelvin provides a slightly different account of 'how things work.' He suggests that there are other features of the 'scene' that may interfere with a quest for intimacy – boredom, or sense of moving onwards and upwards:

I think they [gay men] struggle to draw that line...people get into relationships and it might go a little bit, you know, get a bit hairy at times or a little bit boring, so they go out and you've got this world of men there and Prince Charming comes up and works his magic or tries to...it's all too common. But I think people aren't able to kind of draw that line and recognise that, okay, well, you know, as in other relationships, things can be worked out. Things can be spiced up. It's, 'No, I don't wanna deal with that. I'm moving onto the next best thing.' I think about it all the time. I wish I could articulate it a little bit better but the scene's...it's almost a dangerous place to be, mentally. (Kelvin)

There are resonances here of the 'pure relationship:' one cannot expect to 'coast along' (Giddens, 1991: 90) as one might expect in a relationship dominated by external criteria (Giddens, 1991). The likely outcome would be the disaffection of the other partner

(Giddens, 1991). One might question, however, if these relationships are completely unbounded by 'external criteria.' Participants in this study spoke about the weight of family and societal expectation and the spectre of AIDS as influencing the trajectories of their relationships. Rich, for example, spoke about the boundaries he experienced when he first came out:

And I think the fear, the fear is like even my parents, as much as they were accepting, their fear was that in those days too they were worried that you might get HIV or AIDS, or anything like that. 'Are you taking precaution? Are you safe?' 'Look, we've called the dinner party to say we know you're gay. We all accept you. We're happy for you to bring guys home, the same as your, your brothers and sisters do. But we only ask you to bring guys home when you're in a relationship or you feel something towards this person. Don't bring someone different home every night.' And I think because I had that exposure to the [AIDS] ward it made me realise that there is no sex unless it's safe sex. You know what I mean? You can't take a risk, you know. Everyone gets tied up in moments, in alcohol and drugs, and you're playing with fire, especially in those days, you know. (Rich)

Art frames these elements of the 'scene' in a slightly different way, counter-posing these elements of the 'scene' with a 'happier' life:

So, yes, in terms of my engagement with the gay community and, life, you know, I've had a much quieter life, *I've kind of settled into being in a happy partnership* [emphasis added]. and don't go out – go out little and very little involved with community organisations. (Art)

Ten years prior to this interview, Art had been very involved in activism around HIV policy and had been very 'community attached.' At the time of his more recent interview, he had recently been married in Canada as a Canadian citizen to his Australian partner.

Several important points emerge from these data. Firstly, that for these participants, stereotypes about gay men and promiscuity are abundant. Secondly, that the 'scene' impels this promiscuity which is in opposition to a quiet, happy partnership. In saying this, I am not attempting to establish a binary of 'good gay,' 'bad gay;' whereby 'good gay' men find partners and settle down and 'bad gay' men remain 'scene-attached,' and participate in many casual sexual encounters. However, there is still a scandal that 'hangs over our head even when we are in our Sunday finest—especially then' (Warner, 1999a: 40) – that is the sex part of homosexuality. As Michael Warner points out, if you 'behave yourself' (1999a: 40), 'you can have a decent life as a normal homo – at least, up to a point' (1999a: 40).

Although these participants identify this tension, they don't want their relationships judged through the lens of the stereotype. At the same time, they recognise the social disapprobation of the promiscuity that is often conveniently attached to gay male sexuality. There are men who can uncouple sex from intimacy – yet the same may also be said for straight men and women. Keegan, for example, relates his experience with his flatmate: 'My flat mate's a female and she has an open relationship with her boyfriend. And she uses the *open part of it* [emphasis added]. more than he does, I think.'

Lastly, there is nothing 'wrong' with promiscuity itself, providing that all involved parties are concordant with the risks sometimes attached. Nonetheless, it is important to illustrate how participants in this study try to make sense of their desire for love and intimacy in a 'scene' that seems to spurn this very wish. Participants tended to characterise this in projections about how they would feel if they were to meet someone with whom they wished to have an intimate, loving relationship. Kelvin, for example, talks about the complications associated with finding someone who might want to 'settle down:'

And nowadays, unless you either find someone on that scene that can exercise self-control or has really good self-awareness, or just are genuinely well-rounded or just genuinely a nice person that goes there just to have fun, that's not immersed in this culture of use and abuse...I



think there's a lot of them that do know exactly what they're doing and they don't give a shit, and this mind-set where that's okay. I don't know why, or how, but they do. (Kelvin)

Kelvin is here referring to his previous point about 'use and abuse,' that is, using a person for sexual gratification without thinking about their emotional needs. Mike, too, talks about his experience in looking for intimacy out there in the 'scene,' reflecting upon the rejection he has experienced in the past:

It really fits in this kind of sense that we are all searching for intimacy, searching for a connection with someone...I don't know if you can associate that with like this idea of loneliness and one thing a sense of belonging or just us as human beings, one thing to connect with each other. And it definitely points to a very kind of raw experience and emotion that I feel I've definitely gone through it a lot in the past. (Mike)

Kelvin relates these disappointments, these 'raw' experiences to the sexualised culture of the 'scene:'

I think people lose track of what everything's about and because it's so sexualised, it's, it's part of the culture, like sex in itself, you know, especially when you're single and you go out and then it's hard for people to detach themselves from that when they do get into relationships. (Kelvin)

Kelvin's narrative highlights another point about the struggle for intimacy, at least intimacy in the way he understands it and wants it to be. Although sex and intimacy are analytically different concepts, in practice, they are often linked (Jamieson, 1998: 106), though sometimes in contradictory ways. This is perhaps one of the greatest battles for the men in this study, and even for gay men more generally. Ben identifies this battle among his client group of gay men who use substances problematically:

I think they think that they don't have a great relationship with intimacy, but what I hear from their story is they have a constant relationship with intimacy, but do not recognise it as such because it's not the white, glossy

image, the two men in the white suit walking down the aisle, you know.  
(Ben)

Ben goes on to describe what intimacy looks like in this vast, alienating 'scene.' He describes it in the following way:

Loving someone enough to be able to have them see all parts of you and not feel like you want to remove yourself from it, that you wanna shut down, that you wanna close yourself off, that it gets too much. So, it's when people have those sorts of separation from someone, then they identify that as a reason for their inability to be intimate whereas, actually, when you uncover the stories, you hear intimacy over and over, and over again, in their stories, and their search for intimacy. (Ben)

Contestation about the meaning of intimacy is a recurrent theme in the stories of the participants. This finding should not be surprising if, as Anthony Giddens (1992) suggests, we live in an age of 'plastic sexuality.' For Giddens, 'episodic sexuality' is a means whereby individuals develop and elaborate upon intimacy (1992: 147). Moreover, in his analysis, contemporary 'episodic sexuality' is paralleled with the bathhouse culture of the 1960s (Hoffman, 1973), in which many sexual encounters were anonymously made in a single visit. Yet, the experiences of some of the participants in this study clearly tell a different story. Kelvin, for example, spoke about how it is an exercise of self-control that might safeguard intimacy:

I think there comes a time where you do start getting in a serious relationship, you have to think about things a lot more and, you know, kind of exercise self-control a great deal. Like it's still there but, you know, *you've got someone* [emphasis added]. (Kelvin)

It is no wonder therefore, that uncertainty and confusion exist over the meaning of intimacy. In a time of 'plastic sexuality' Giddens suggests that 'sexual exclusiveness is only one way in which commitment to another is protected and integrity achieved' (1992: 147). However, narratives of traditional forms of romance persist. Nor are these two narratives mutually-exclusive, for, as Giddens points out, romantic love involves a 'meeting of the souls which is reparative in character' (1992: 45). The participants in

this study point to this very concept. Mike, for example, characterised this desired 'psychic communication' (Giddens, 1992: 45) in the following way:

As I came out to the gay scene, it was a very much more searching, you know, place of belonging. 'Is there one for me, that person, that boyfriend or whoever, partner to complete, so-to-speak, my life?' And, progressively, as the years go by, you know, those get challenged as well. Is there really the one? Can we expect someone to always fulfil that other half or our better half? (Mike)

Similarly, Art questioned the likelihood of finding one's Romeo, 'the one:'

I was willing to write down and kind of channel a single, gay man who was definitely wanting a relationship and definitely looking for someone. I knew it was, it was a big emotional passage, you know, am I going to find this person? There's a lot of gay men, who have a romanticism about finding, about perfect partner or not, or finding somebody who they're going to be with. Does that sense of romance stay or not? (Art)

Happily, ten years later, Art said he had found 'the one.' For many gay men then, entering the 'scene' means being bombarded by contradictory messages about intimacy, fulfilment and love. Indeed, as Kelvin eloquently points out, for many, the 'scene' is, a mentally and emotionally dangerous place. Despite many profound advances in social 'acceptance,' the sex part of homosexuality remains a scandal (Warner, 1999a). This becomes a key thread in the stories of the participants in this study, especially when they negotiate for themselves intimacy and love. All of this questioning also feeds uncertainties about what to feel and how to act. Kelvin, for example, said:

And I think that, in a lot of cases, it's [uncertainty] driven by insecurities which again, going back to that 'scene,' it is riddled with insecurities and I think that's why half the reason for the behaviours that go on, the strange behaviours, the silly stuff [the 'use and abuse']. (Kelvin)

At this point we return to the original observation: Although gay people, and gay men in 'Western' countries, now have much greater acceptance and freedom, there is still so

much tumult in their inner worlds related to desire, intimacy and love. For example, when asked whether he thought these greater freedoms were good for gay men, Kelvin replied:

Come full circle: In some respects, yes, but, predominantly ... well the way the scene is, no. I think for gay people, as a whole, yes, and I think, we're talking specifically about the 'scene,' no. Gay culture, as a whole, or the gay community, as a whole, because I think life gets very blurred living gay culture. (Kelvin)

If, as Kelvin suggests, living gay culture makes life 'blurred', producing a beclouded mix of emotional faithfulness, sex, and intimacy, then we need to explore how participants make sense of this mix. And as we see from the examples provided below, it is often through love that respondents are able to resolve these dilemmas and reconcile the apparent contradictions between sex and intimacy.

### **Narratives of love**

I kind of gravitated to identifying with that... You know, wanting or, aspirationally leaning towards that [Michael in Queer as Folk] rather than Brian. So, to me Brian was someone who was I guess it presented itself as a kind of typical gay narrative or Oxford Street kind of party narrative and one that I felt, yeah, sure, friends of mine are like that and it's cool, it's all right. But I didn't see myself as that. (Mike)

Participants described how important love was for its own sake. Phillip, for example, who at the time of interview had been in relationship or about three years, said:

I think also just people being in love, how do you describe that, it's really difficult, but love is, I'm not going to start describing it but I think love is really important for all gay men and even intimacy. (Phillip)

For the participants in this study, love is articulated in a variety of ways. For Rich for example, who at the time of this interview had been married to his partner Matt for three years, described love as a more 'normal, suburban' kind of love as a way of

resisting the almost lampoon-like representations of gay men and their intimate relationships:

Well I think it's a case of I can remember when you used to see on TV it was mainly like guys walking around with no clothes on, drag queens' impersonations. Mardi Gras was very much, you know, that men dressed as women, sleazy and I think I can remember that their [society's] interpretation was, 'Who are these queens? Who are these pooftas?' Like ... But not seeing how I would have been just as normal as anybody else in a relationship, not cross-dressing, not screaming, not being ... But that's what they saw as a vision and that was their interpretation of gay...I think so. More than 'two men being together'... It wasn't so much two guys being together; it was more that girlie, gay, queenie, you know, mincy, real over-the-top type, that people reacted to...Where I think now people are seen as professional couples. *We're no different to the next-door neighbour* [emphasis added]. (Rich)

Rich and Matt live in a quiet suburb on the fringe of a large metropolitan area. They talk about their neighbours in the way one might expect in such a setting, as neither 'busybodies, nor nobodies' (Crow, Allan & Summers, 2002); that is, they maintain a pleasant and mutually-agreeable distance, occasionally breaching this distance. I did not get a sense from Matt and Rich that these amenable neighbourly relations could be attributed to a sense of 'passing' (Garfinkel, 2006). Rather, I observed that Rich and Matt talked about love in their relationship simply as 'two men being together,' nothing more nor less.

Rich and Matt reflect upon a couple they know that lives an hour or so drive away. Rich and Matt have said that an open relationship is not for them, and speak about the other couple in the following way:

Like we know a couple in Brisbane who have been together for about 16 years. And they've had an open relationship from day one. But it works for them. It's not in any way or form seen as cheating. It was discussed from day one. They've been happy with that situation for 15 years. *They*

*truly love each other. They're very committed to each other. They live together. They've got a house, dogs [emphasis added]. They've got the normal life, but it's something that they've agreed on that's been for a long time. So, I s'pose it, it seems normal because it works for them. (Rich)*

Again, Rich juxtaposes his sense of what constitutes a 'normal' life, for example, having a house, dogs, with what might usually be considered 'abnormal,' that is, having a non-monogamous relationship. In doing so, Rich represents these two approaches as a contradiction which could feed into a more dogmatic framing of the issue. For although Western societies have almost come to accept homosexual cohabitation (Evans, 2003: 127), there remain patterns of behaviour, connecting 'sex to romantic, quasi-marital and family values' (Seidman, 2004: 150) prescribing what is 'good gay' behaviour. It is argued here that sexual non-exclusivity most-likely does not fit that pattern. Rather, two common threads appear to be significant in how these men make this relationship work:

Rich: There are rules ... They're quite open about it which I think is an amazing thing. I don't think when you've got two gay guys like that who do what they do and (are) very open and very comfortable, and proud of who they are ... But they have rules obviously and we've seen them when we've gone out with them that, you know, one can't bring someone back to the house unless they've got permission off the other one. And there's rules in place I s'pose because, you know, there's always that chance that someone's not gonna be happy with the situation at the time. But it works for them. I mean you can see that they truly love each other. They're committed to each other. Is it cheating? I don't think so because it's been on the tables. They're not going behind each other's backs. They're not sleeping out.

Matt: They've discussed and they're both happy with that.

Rich: But it works for them fantastic...you can't judge peoples' circumstances and relationships.

Rich and Matt observe that there are 'rules,' and there is love. Kelvin makes a similar observation about the 'rules,' saying:

There would have to be. Love and appreciation for each other and wot-not. But ... yeah, there'd have to be friendship in there. There'd have to be trust in there - absolutely... It'd be a personal thing between two people. Just open communication and, you know, communicating what's appropriate, what's not, and maintaining that, as with any relationship I think. (Kelvin)

Two major points therefore emerge from the stories of Matt, Rich and Kelvin. The first is that despite both its conformity and non-conformity to more conventional narratives, love underpins these intimate relationships. The second is that there is a form of calculation, or rational choice, in the way these men manage their relationships. As we see here, there are several ways to look at love itself. In the first instance, one might view love, as Evans (1998) points out, and as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) do, as a 'fixed category' (Evans 1998: 273), that assumes different meanings in different contexts, without the interference of external constraints. This may help to explain the love that Matt and Rich describe above in the relationship of their friends. Or, in the second, one might emphasize the paradoxical nature of (commercialised) romance (Evans, 1998: 274); that is, the searching for and finding 'the one,' the escape from loneliness, which in the end became bound up in all kinds of mores and social structures that prohibited it (Evans, 1998). This too provides a compelling account of the love Matt and Rich see in their friends' relationship. Certainly, their friends' love is not patterned as it should be according to the commodified and commercialised tales of romance (this point is taken up further in relation to the 'wedding' part of marriage equality). Nonetheless, there is still an entity which the participants identify as love, that holds the relationships together and brings the individuals fulfilment.

As Evans points out, this looking for 'the one' 'who will make good the agony of separation and the costs of autonomy' (Evans, 1998: 274), sits within day-to-day human experience, despite the paradox mentioned above. And indeed, as Kelvin points out, this search does not always yield exactly what one might want:

People get blinded by that kind of stuff...the ultimate objective in life is to fall in love...And they all want it and, regardless of what damage it can actually do in terms of chasing that when it's not actually, it all gets blurred for a lot of people. (Kelvin)

Kelvin had previously spoken about how, when 'living gay culture,' life becomes blurred, by which I think he was referring to this struggle over intimacy and sex. He went on to talk about what for him would need to characterise 'the one':

Like the ultimate thing to me is if you're gonna have a relationship with someone, to me it's about looking at that person and saying, 'I could spend the rest of my life with that person. They are my friend. I really do trust them. I adore them.' If you can't, then you should be able to say, 'I'm sorry.' Despite, you know, whether they might see that in you, if you can't do it to them, if I could never love that person back, why would I pretend? Because that's not fair on them in the long-run, so I don't know. It's so tricky, yeah. It's a tricky one. (Kelvin)

Here Kelvin also articulates the element of calculation which may be a part of searching for 'the one'. It is not without limits, nor is it a complete abandonment of the rational, which Evans (2003) suggests contemporary accounts of falling in love may entail. Mike, for example, spoke about love as something enduring, lasting beyond the initial fascination and related to the ongoing development of the relationship:

I guess love is that kind of like nebulous thing that we don't know what it is to call, but I think, definitely, the sense of seeing someone for who they are, the essence that you find in the other person beyond this kind of physical love or kind of the infatuating, infatuated modes that you get to when you first meet that person, when all those things die down, the essence that what keeps you together...the daily discovery sometimes that you might see in your partner is what keeps it going...And I guess openness to seeing that as well. (Mike)



Other participants spoke about love in the more rational language of compatibility which involves growing together, moving through similar ways of thinking and sharing beliefs. Art spoke about this in the following way:

I think happiness is when you've found somebody who you're compatible with in terms of those beliefs, so it's not dependent on the belief themselves, but rather you share those beliefs with other people, or whether you develop in the same direction because certainly, you know, people's ideas change and if they develop in the same direction, then that's good. (Art)

Art was talking here about communicating needs and desires with one's partner. There is an element of rationality in disclosing these needs and desires as this disclosure leads to the fulfilment of these desires, or, if not, then at least it opens the possibility for two-way communication. Looking at mutual disclosure in this way shines a light on rationality which Evans identifies in her early analyses of romantic fiction (1998). For example, when examining characters who have successful marriages in the novels of Jane Austen – Evans suggests that they exhibit open dialogue, 'Socratic conversation and discourse' (Evans, 1998: 266). Austen urges us, Evans suggests, to see that love can sometimes be a very reasonable pursuit, constructed 'within a discourse of rational thought and discussion' (Evans, 1998: 267-268).

Although Evans was talking about the marriage decisions of female characters in post Enlightenment England, at one level, her discussion of love also has relevance to the love stories of my respondents. I would argue that part of this rational thought and discussion must involve being honest about one's own perceived failings, letting the other person know what to expect. Participants in the study described how their willingness to expose their skeletons in the closet also entailed a sense of vulnerability. Mike for example, characterising it in the following way:

I think it's the...willingness to allow and be vulnerable with each other and also to kind of take in your stride any kind of differences or difference of needs, and being okay, and being able to work through them rather

than reacting and kind of running away from it. Maybe that was what I tend to associate with what intimacy is. (Mike)

Art echoes this sentiment when speaking about his expectations of honesty in an intimate relationship, connecting trust and belief in what the other says can be relied upon (Giddens, 1991) with faithfulness, more so than monogamy:

To me, being faithful to somebody is to be honest to them and to, you know, make a commitment to them, to be honest and kind of carry through with what you say you're going to do if you're in a relationship, to give a go at being in the relationship, to respect who they are but, I don't usually think about faithfulness in terms of, I don't usually attach it to or use it to describe monogamy. (Art)

For Mike, love is bound up with trust in the relationship that allows the individual to be vulnerable and flourish:

Again, trust is that kind of nebulous thing. It's very tied-in with love, actually. That whole trust and love: it's not necessarily, it's not separate. I see it as quite one. It's that sense of like you really can be yourself firstly to trust your partner whatever you throw him, really, and to accept who you are. And a sort of trusting of yourself to, to also make that vulnerable jump. Not necessarily holding you back because, holding yourself back because you feel, 'He might not like certain parts of me,' or, you know, 'I might be troubled.' Or, 'I don't want him to see my skeletons in the closet.' And there's a lot of both trusting that relationship - the other person - as well as trusting yourself...when you go down to the basis of what trust is, it's beyond just kind of by words or by actions; it's kind of that sense that you can be vulnerable to the other person. (Mike)

Mike describes a sense of wholeness attached to trusting one's partner and allowing one to be vulnerable. Trust and mutual disclosure between two individuals featured prominently in the love stories of the participants, which is the concern of the next chapter.

In this chapter, we have seen that the 'scene' can be a dangerous place, emotionally and mentally. Highly-sexualised narratives abound around the relationships of gay men, often interfering with the participants stories about themselves and their search for intimacy. The search for intimacy is real and complicated for the men in this study. Resolving contestations about the meaning of intimacy and how this is related to sex is no easy task. Contradictions and confusions lie at the centre of these men's stories and their experiences of looking for intimacy in the 'scene.' Love is one way these men describe resolving these apparent contradictions. Mediated by popular cultural texts, love stories were elemental in the ways that participants made sense of their worlds. It is to these love stories we now turn.



## CHAPTER SIX

### The love stories



In the previous chapter, we saw how ‘the scene’ can be a dangerous place emotionally, and how confusion over the meanings and experience of intimacy and sexuality can, in some ways, be ameliorated by love. Here, we turn to the love stories of the participants in this study. These stories are important as they illuminate broader concepts related to the freedoms, and challenges, that intimate personal relationships may bring. Stories telling the need for a pluralist approach, in which one size does not indeed fit all, remind us of the paradox that, ‘when love finally wins it has to face all kinds of defeat’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 78). Similarly, stories detailing the characteristics of loving relationships recall a centuries-old maxim that for some, ‘familiarity diminishes desire’ (de Beauvoir [1965], as cited in Evans, 2003: 81). The same stories also highlight another concept – that of faithfulness. If indeed there have been wholesale transformations in intimacy (Giddens, 1991; 1992), how do they appear in the love stories of the men in this study? To elucidate these themes further, we look at the resonances, narrated by the participants in the study, between the fictive texts and auto/biography, and consider how these resonances help these men interpret and understand sexuality, intimacy and love.

As Ken Plummer points out, the time for sociology to be ‘bound up both with obtaining stories and telling stories’ (1995: 19) has already arrived. While recognising the ‘folly of the quick interview’ (Plummer, 2010: 168) nonetheless, an individual’s story may yet provide a fertile base for exploring ‘grander’ sociological concepts and may indeed prefigure ‘major social changes as result of being told’ (Plummer, 1995: 49). In this study, the story of Josh is chosen as one such story, not in the same way Agnes was chosen by Garfinkel (1967) to articulate the ongoing nature of gender as a ‘matter of continuous learning and ‘work’ (Giddens, 1991: 63), nor to depict a life-story built on untruths (Plummer, 2010: 168). Rather, Josh’s story was chosen as a vignette that points towards this group of men’s more common experiences. We start with Josh’s story before moving on to a more theoretical discussion.

## Josh

Josh talks about his first relationship and reflects upon his expectations for that relationship. Josh clearly wanted something more than just sex from this relationship, but at the same time, given the narrative he had about gay relationships, he didn't hold high hopes:

...we were friends first and we got to know each other very well and, when we did hook up like it was just fucking awesome because – and formed a relationship. It was nice, it wasn't expected or, that wasn't the first thing we're thinking about. You're just thinking like I just met this really nice bloke and I'd like to see him again and you know, not busting to fuck him or whatever. I don't know, – I can't say, I've never thought about it too much, but I do agree that it's expected to be a short-term thing, even the gay people will say that gay relationships as a whole don't last very long. (Josh)

Josh felt this ambivalence despite having met a couple who had been together for 40 years, a relationship Josh held in esteem:

I always thought that was nice. I thought oh like they're really humble and quiet and they just have each other... and they're friends. Maybe they were raging fags in Sydney shooting up speed at one stage, but they didn't seem to be. Anyway, they're still together. So I thought that was nice. (Josh)

Within this quote lies a composite of the confusion all of the participants noted around their own experiences of the 'scene' and intimacy. Josh goes on to relate a time when he had had an intimate relationship. This was at a time when he was working as an escort. Josh knew that the other man would need to leave the country, but nonetheless pursued an intimate relationship with him:

So we met up and got a motel room and yeah, he's like, 'I really like you.' And I said, 'I really like you too.' And yeah, it was nice, but it was kind of hard because we would sit in the room and watch each other take strange

men into the room all the time all day and then, you know, we'd get a motel room at night and after fucking all night, we would just like lay there and cuddle I suppose [laughs]. Fucking all day...yeah, it was nice. I really liked him and I was really upset when he left. I knew he was leaving, we had about six months. (Josh)

Josh's story rings with disappointment –and a yearning for intimacy which he finds fleeting. Perhaps this is why he later said he had never been in a relationship, echoing what Ben had said about his clients and their troubled relationship with intimacy. Josh reflected upon his own story in relation to John's story in *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995):

I've never been in a relationship myself, but I feel like if I was, I would never – even when I was younger, I remember reading that and thinking the same, I suppose siding with John, like if you were in a relationship with somebody and you loved them, even if you were very young and you hadn't had much experience, why would you if you're with a person and you loved them and they loved you back...why would you want to go and fuck other people? I'd hate – I would hate the thought of my boyfriend fucking someone else or getting fucked or whatever in – if I was in a relationship with them. I think it's horrible. (Josh)

Love, then, for Josh, includes sexual exclusivity. When asked about the sorts of 'rules' that go along with a relationship that was not sexually-exclusive, Josh said:

I think, you know, maybe you'd have to trust each other quite a lot to make those rules and have that kind of relationship, to trust that they, I don't know, wear rubbers or to trust that they only see each other when you know about it. I don't know, I just feel like if they're your boyfriend – it's not what you do...I can't explain it better than that, but I've always thought that, even when I was young, I think it's wrong. (Josh)

Josh was in his late 20s at the time of interview in 2015. Most would say that is still young, but what is interesting is the persistent narrative about what he considers to be

the features of a loving relationship. Josh accounts for this in the following way when talking about HIV prevention through reducing the number of sexual partners:

Yep, but not my only reason for [sexual exclusivity] – I think my other reason is stronger than that...I think I would be very loyal to them, you know, open I wouldn't have the desire to sleep with other people and I would expect the same I suppose. (Josh)

Josh's is an interesting story: on the one hand, he found intimacy while working as an escort, on the other, he has this strong narrative related to love and sexual exclusivity. Many of the features of Josh's story align with the stories of the other participants' experiences of sex, intimacy and love, and how these are all connected with the broader sociological concepts discussed below.

### **Stories of love**

I don't think he, John was left with a choice. I think John loved Tim. I think Tim was, you know, I couldn't explain his reasoning, but I felt even devastated in that part of the book because John was happy to just love Tim and, you know, Tim would have been fine, but Tim had urges and wot-not. And if you read through most of them, didn't seem very satisfying at all. When he acted on those urges, it just seemed like maybe gratifying for an instant but, as a whole, it was nothing in comparison to what he had with John. And the hurt that John went through...And it's almost like Tim just disregarded John's feelings so I don't think there was any negotiation whatsoever in that kind of thing. John just kind of allowed it and moved on, by the sounds of it. And still held love for him, you know, which you probably would. (Kelvin)

### ***Pluralism: commitment and love***

Participants related the importance of commitment in their love stories. Commitment, however, could mean different things to different couples. For Matt, for example,

commitment meant sexual exclusivity. Taking a pluralistic approach, however, Matt said that his approach may not suit the needs of all couples:

If I commit to you, I will commit to you for life. If we split up, that's that. You go your separate paths. I don't believe in - and I don't say there's anything wrong with it - but me personally I, I'm not in a relationship where I'm out sleeping with other guys. This is the guy I'm with and this is who I'll be with hopefully 'til I die. Like I'm very committed in that way and I, I don't, there's nothing wrong in what other people do, but it's very common in the gay community to be in a committed relationship but have open relationships and sleep with other people. Me personally it doesn't suit me, so I don't. I agree like once you're in that relationship you're in that relationship. (Matt)

Similarly, Kelvin recognises a diversity of relationships, but goes further to opine that the open relationships Matt mentions, may be 'quite damaging:'

Most of the people that I know that are in relationships are in very solid, long-term, monogamous, supportive, healthy relationships. I know of people that aren't actually within my immediate circle of friends. A lot of relationships that I see out and about: obviously the scene that we're a part of, there's some very weird and wonderful concepts of what a relationship is. It's, you know, these open relationships ... I mean I've had friends that have been in open relationships and it's, from what I've witnessed, can be quite damaging. But I would say the ones that I'm exposed to on a regular basis are, are beautiful. How it should be; long-term friendships, you know. (Matt)

To a degree, Kelvin privileges the more conventional, sexually-exclusive relationships, which aligns closely with his analysis of the 'scene' in which he describes observing a 'use and abuse' mentality. Art makes reference to this mentality, but frames it in a slightly different way. Art describes witnessing an array of different arrangements, including those where the utility of the relationship is considered:



I look at my friends around me and they're just a whole mix, you know, where someone ends up and decides for themselves that they are going to have a genuinely monogamous relationship with their partner or not much fooling around, or whether they are completely promiscuous and also are completely faithful, you know, to their partners in an emotional way, or you know, other people who were just, you know, not as romantic at all, were much more utilitarian about their relationships. (Art)

Shadows of Susan Sontag's statement about sexual 'efficiency' (1989: 76) emerge here. Art described a kind of plurality in which sexual relationships may have a utility, or as Sontag observes, be an 'exercise in liberty' (1989: 77). This, however, was not straightforward for Art in his own experience. He describes his experience with his first boyfriend in the following way:

What I told myself and what the models were, is that you're with somebody and then that's all you want to be with. I didn't expect at all this idea that I would have sex and then I would be hornier and looking at other people and nor that this would actually be a problem, you know, 'cause when I did try to discuss it with him a little bit, in a very honest, naïve way, saying this is how I feel, he got so upset because that's not how it was supposed to be, so I was dealing with, on the one hand I was dealing with being in a relationship for the first time and his expectations.(Art)

This is tricky territory, for Art and for theorising. If, on the one hand, sex and sexuality can be seen as an instrument in the 'pushing back of limits' (Sontag, 1989: 77), then one would expect greater self-fulfilment. If, on the other, however, unlimited sexual expression shirks the restrictions placed on experience by commitment (Sennett [1977] in Giddens, 1991: 170), what is left of the body in 'relating sensuality to communication with others' (Giddens, 1991: 170)?

Art may have some of the answer:

I think that some men manage to figure out the sex part pretty early, you know, and I think there is, that's a whole different issue. I do separate

them in my mind between, figuring out the sex part of the gay community and how you go about having sex and having flings and then also the relations part, the relationship part about, you know, how you might want to date people and how you might want to pursue some sort of romance.

(Art)

It is unfortunate phrasing to say that gay men have the ability to frequently separate sex and intimacy (Jamieson, 1998: 127), as it discredits, in a way, gay men's capacity to connect sex with intimacy. Art's love story suggests that the body is, but one of many ways of demonstrating commitment. He describes emotional faithfulness as important as well.

A final point to be made relates to changing notions of commitment over time. So far we have seen that in the love stories of the participants, commitment may or may not include sexual exclusivity, but is nonetheless fundamental to intimate, loving relationships. While in a sexually-liberated culture, in which sex is freely available, and constitutes a part of many types of social relations, there is little impetus to long-term intimate relationships (Evans, 2003: 139). For some gay men, that is but one part of a narrative that may change over time. Mike, for example, spoke about dreams that he has had in the past:

I guess there's always that ideal of setting up house and like really very much a white picket fence dream thing that maybe as a person growing up from the Disney kind of...growing up with this, you know, you get fed this very much fairy-tale like reality, for a long while that was what I aspired to. And having to revisit that in the last few years was really interesting as well, in that, yeah, it works differently for everyone.

There's no one reality, one narrative that is the all, be-all and end-all.

(Mike)

Much like Matt and Art, Mike describes a position he once held, a position that may not be for everyone all of the time. Mike went on to talk about how his views, and desires, had changed in recent time:

And I think that was what I grew out of, yeah. I kind of moved along the different phases, if you may, of like, this gayness. I'm in a relationship now and it's been going on for quite a few years so, in a sense, it's a very normalised kind of co-existence and there's, you know, set up house and do all the kind of home, domestic things. And that's very comfortable and enjoyable. (Mike)

It is of especial interest that Mike describes 'growing out' of the 'fairy-tale' idea, and that his current relationship is 'very normalised' (these points are taken up further in the last chapter). This 'growing out' of an idea has led Mike to further questions about relationships more broadly:

And, at the same time, I also question the idea of, should we always kind of talk about this idea of I guess settling down and monogamy, and all that stuff. And is that always the angle for us? And for myself I, I don't know. See, I still see it as a evolving journey and maybe, in the end, I might think monogamy is not the way to go. Maybe it's more kind of an open relationship so polygamy even. And I'm not closed to those ideas. So, it really is taking - you'll cross, cross the bridge when you get there kind of thing but it, it's also about opening up to different possibilities. (Mike)

Mike is pointing towards the reconstruction of his own sexual stories – the ongoing project in which we draw 'continuously on our imagined pasts' (Plummer, 2010: 168) and at the same time, construct and reconstruct the future. Mike connects this journey with his sense of *Dasein* or being one (Heidegger, ([1927]1962), his sense of being Mike:

There's all these different ways of being and we shouldn't close ourselves off to one, one reality. And sometimes thinking about relationships also is not the biggest priority anymore. I don't care too much about it maybe. And maybe because I'm there, you know, living it, it doesn't, it doesn't seem to, yeah, crop up in my thoughts that much anymore. (Mike)

Commitment of various colours features in the love stories of these men. For these participants, commitment may or may not include embodiment as monogamy.

Contemporary intimate relationships face a whole raft of challenges (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Evans, 2003; Giddens, 1991) in that they do not have the 'external anchors' (Giddens, 1991: 92), or institutional ties that they may once have had. In response to these challenges, the participants in this study describe ways of resolving these issues which include plurality, or an individualised sense of need, and the construction and reconstruction of sexual stories over time (Plummer, 2010). Love, as a form of commitment (Giddens, 1991: 92), as we saw in the previous chapter, becomes a way too of resolving the unsettled nature of the relationship between intimacy and sex.

In the next section, we look at how the participants describe dimensions of intimacy within their love stories and the role of trust and mutual disclosure. The concept of faithfulness is also used to probe how the participants talked about their love stories when they did not work out quite as planned.

### ***Dimensions of intimacy: trust and mutual disclosure***

As we have seen, the participants in this study were eager to find intimacy - close associations including shared detailed knowledge of the other (Jamieson, 1998: 8). Part of that intimacy is trust, or the ability to know that what the other does and says can be relied upon (Giddens, 1991: 96). Intimacy is, in this way, connected so closely to mutual disclosure, which is ultimately 'necessary to sustain intimate exchanges' (Giddens, 1991: 96). It is this belief that what the other says is true which provides a precondition for feelings of security, allowing for intimacy to develop as part of the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991: 96). For participants in this study, this trust was characterised by really getting to know someone, or becoming one unit. Kelvin, for example, reflects upon what is important, in the end, for intimate relationships:

Ultimately, you've gotta look later in life. That's what it's about. Well what better thing than to sit back with your partner when you're in your sixties and reflect on what a beautiful life you've had, you know? Know and understand each other and be that, you know, one unit. (Kelvin)

This emphasis of a co-creation of stories is suggestive of the ways in which self-identity is moulded by the negotiation of intimacy between two people (Giddens, 1991: 97); that

is, as Kelvin suggests, the intimacy derived from a trusting relationship, in which one truly gets to know the other, is a source of comfort and reassurance. For some participants, this mutual disclosure was absolutely critical to the continuation of their intimate relationships. Keegan, for example, was first interviewed in 2006, at which time he reported that he was in a loving, trusting relationship, and that while he and his partner had no explicit agreement about sexual exclusivity, there was a tacit acceptance that they may sleep with other people. Keegan talks about his then-partner's trip to New York for his birthday:

Well I don't know if I've ever sat down and had like a conversation but properly, I suppose...What goes on tour, stays on tour, and he's kind of said to me that whatever I get up to is fine, as long as he doesn't know about it so that's kind of his view of it. (Keegan)

At the time, Keegan expressed a general level of insouciance regarding any affairs going on outside his relationship in which his then-partner may be involved, largely because he said he could rely in what his partner told him. Keegan was then interviewed again in 2015, at which time he related this story:

And we'd only just walked up the road and he [then-partner] was getting all this sex gear out and putting it on the bed. Which we never used, right? And I just looked at it and went, 'Uh, I'm going to deal with this another time.' And went to the concert and the whole time, like my heart was going, what the fuck, you know? And it just - it sort of hit me for six. I didn't even see it coming. I didn't realise we had a problem, or he was interested in other people or anything. (Keegan)

Keegan's then-partner had arranged for others to come to their house to have sex in Keegan's absence. Keegan and his then-partner went their separate ways shortly thereafter. The important point in this story relates to the breakdown of trust and lack of mutual disclosure. So many elements of trust are assailed in Keegan's story. Keegan took the gamble that his partner would act with integrity (Giddens, 1992: 138), and lost. Keegan's expression of his 'heart going' suggests an inner turmoil, an experience of

emotions that he would not want others to see (Giddens, 1992: 138). In the absence of trust, this mutual bond was unable to 'withstand future traumas' (Giddens, 1992: 138).

Keegan learned from this experience. Years later, and in a different city, he talks about a casual partnering he had had with someone who had a boyfriend. Keegan talks about the rationale for this interaction, and how he concentrated on that sense of security described earlier:

I thought well, the boyfriend knew about it [Keegan's involvement], like he had an open relationship and everything and he was seeing people here. And I thought well, I could justify it in my head. And I thought good, because actually, that meant that I wasn't going to hurt anyone. Well, in my head. Because, unless he fell in love with me, then that would be a whole other issue...So that sort of filled a need... and I was never going to fall in love with him anyway. (Keegan)

Falling in love would change the whole situation for Keegan, and potentially his casual partner and his boyfriend. There is here a kind of unarticulated trust because Keegan trusts that the other person will not fall in love with him, nor he with the other. Intimacy is achieved via this sense of trust (Giddens, 1991: 96). Keegan says later on that things get 'really complicated and messy' if this level of trust is not established upfront and that this is a 'conversation had early on.'

While on the one hand, it is trust and mutual disclosure that galvanises intimacy, it may also be that a shared secret strengthens intimacy. As Laurel Richardson (1988) describes in her study of forbidden sexual relations, all social relations can be characterised by the degree of 'secrecy within and around them' (Simmel, [1908]1950: 331). Robert Paine (1999), who uses fictive texts extensively to illustrate theory on the hazards of friendship as an ideal relationship, takes up this point further by reflecting on the work of Gerald Suttles (1970), writing that friendship as an intimate relationship may be portrayed as a 'social 'exemption' ...aggressively counter-engaging the norms of public social life' (1999: 42). Phillip, when talking about the relationship between Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, 1999), describes their relationship in the following way:

I think, in terms of self-identification and reconciling the behaviour and acknowledging perhaps their own behaviour as in some way being normalized...there's strength in that context, some security also in the context that their secret is theirs and it's nothing to be shared with anyone else, which gives great confidence to the individuals. (Phillip)

Of course, from Phillip's standpoint, their secret provided strength in their relationship, but as we saw in chapter four, it was their secret that kept them alive. Paine (1999) suggests that in fact shared secrets can both bolster and threaten intimate relationships. He offers a version of intimate relationships, in his case friendships, in which 'nesting' (1999: 46) may threaten the individual's sense of self, despite the friendship offering a 'sanctuary' (Paine, 1999: 43) in 'today's 'disembedded' society' (Giddens, 1991). Phillip's own love story highlights this point acutely: the revealing of his secret relationship with his boyfriend at boarding school threatened his sense of security (Giddens, 1991) that intimacy had provided.

One final point regarding intimacy and shared stories: participants drew comfort from a sense of building something with another person, the co-creation of their stories, a shared life, providing them with a conceptual home. Mike, in relating the stories of Tim and John in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995), says:

Maybe it was something that, you know, they've had a shared life together from a very early age. There was that sense of maybe a comfort place, a place to call home. And maybe there was that sense of coming back...You put in all this effort and time, and all that stuff, and the shared kind of past together. There is, in some ways, a certain sense of comfort in that.  
(Mike)

Plummer notes a similar pattern in coming-out stories, the narrative 'seen as a journey, starting out from an uncharted shore with a host of problems and gradually arriving home' (1995: 83-84). In the quote from Mike, we can see that this journey, or shared past, involves effort and time, a key theme that he follows up with this thought:

And then at times when different things might change that and you might break out or different situations arise, you might go separate ways but then, when you revisit or maybe when you come together again, you might find that those are the kind of foundational values that you built together. And then, in a certain sense, maybe also building foundations and relationships are not easy so maybe the shared work of doing it already and having a good foundation is what determines then you're able to go forth with life. And that's I guess what I subscribe to in my relationship nowadays and it's that finding of the shared values, the shared foundation and shared purpose that allows the relationship to thrive. (Mike)

The key themes in Mike's narrative are that things might get in the way of the intimate relationship, but it is the 'shared work' of putting those foundations of a relationship together that can also sustain a relationship. It may even be the case that the relationship melts away, but the foundation remains, much like Plummer's expression of the 'residues' (2010: 168) that get left behind. In effect, Mike is identifying many of the elements of faithfulness described by Georg Simmel ([1908] 1950), to which we now turn.

### ***Faithfulness: what happens when all doesn't go to plan***

For Simmel, faithfulness is a way of understanding the continuation of a relationship even when the original reasons for the formation of that relationship may have faded away. Simmel writes:

...what is important is the existence of a specific psychic and sociological state, which insures the continuance of a relationship beyond the forces that first brought it about...Faithfulness might be called the inertia of the soul. It keeps the soul on the path on which it started, even after the original occasion that led it onto it no longer exists. (Simmel, [1908]1950: 380)



We see this 'inertia of the soul' clearly in the relationship between Dave and his former partner:

When I tried to back out of the relationship that was quite ... I could see it was quite damaging towards him and for some strange reason I just couldn't ... I could not do it...This is not a relationship I would have signed up for if I knew this was going to be like this for sure. Not that I had anything against him, it's just I didn't need give up full time work and live the way I'm living just for the sake of the hell of it, but for somebody like [Justin] I think after this time he deserves it now. And to make life comfortable for him, it's been easier. (Dave)

When Dave first met his former partner, whom we shall call Justin, Dave knew that Justin had HIV. Some years later, Dave and Justin became romantically involved. Over the years, the romantic element of their relationship passed and Dave became Justin's full-time carer as complications related to AIDS worsened. While the relationship may have started out as a romantic one, for Dave it ultimately became a caring one. Dave said, 'I'm in it until the end now and that's all there is to it.'

A similar 'inertia of the soul' is evident in Keegan's narrative. He spoke about relationships he had had in which the other person was more devoted to the relationship than Keegan was. When asked what was important for him after breaking the relationship off with these men, Keegan replied:

What is important for me, is to know that they're not in pain anymore and not hurting and all that sort of stuff...so the fact they say that's not happening and I can visually see it and friends tell me that they're all fine. So that's a relief. You know, because you don't want anyone [hurting]. Well I don't. And you don't deliberately go into a relationship to hurt someone. (Keegan)

Even though Keegan was no longer romantically involved with these men, there lingered some element of care, a care that was most likely there at the inception of the

relationships. His ongoing concern for these men is clear in his narrative as Keegan says, 'I ended up not with either of them, and the consequences of that for both of them were particularly unkind.'

Another feature of faithfulness described by Simmel ([1908]1950) refers to the 'autonomous life of the relation.' Simmel suggests here that the relationship itself has a life of its own. Faithfulness is amplified the longer the relationship persists and the longer the original reasons for being together remain:

As far as it concerns us here, faithfulness or loyalty is the emotional reflection of the autonomous life of the relation, unperturbed by the possible disappearance of the motives which originally engendered the relation. But the longer these motives survive, and the less seriously the power of pure form alone (of the relationship itself) is put to test, the more energetic and certain is the effect of faithfulness. (Simmel, [1908]1950: 383-384)

Rich illustrates this point clearly when he talks about his relationship with Matt:

Look, to me, when you commit to someone, you commit to someone...I also understand too that, when I first met Matt because he hadn't experienced the things that I've experienced in all my life he was a bit hesitant to settle down with one person, and he wanted to go out on dates and meet other guys and that to make sure that this is what he wanted. And I said, 'You need to do that. Whatever it is you need to do, you do it. Because I also don't want to be responsible or held responsible that you didn't experience this. So you need to go and do whatever it is you need to do and then, if we come back together, we're back together.' (Rich)

This is a familiar story for contemporary intimate relationships, not just among gay men. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) describe the process in which couples undertake 'love as homework' (1995: 90), that is, love and actions are constantly negotiated by talk. They, of course, suggest that this may not always be helpful citing the metaphor of the priest who does not live with the confessee. Nonetheless, in

thinking about John and Tim's relationship in *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995), Mike describes exactly this process:

What's the word for it? Like not to say there was maybe there was a conflict - I'm not sure - but there was kind of a negotiation between two sides, two needs, and a coming together that, 'Okay, you can go and do your, what you want, what you need and I'll also do what I have. And then you'll come back again. So, it might be that model for quite a healthy way of approaching different needs - I'm not sure. By that time, I just thought, you know, 'Why, why break a good thing?' (Mike)

In both Rich's analysis of his own relationship, and Mike's analysis of the relationship between Tim and John, the relationships themselves take on a life of their own. Indeed, these relationships are negotiated by individual actors, yet there is something about the full-circle nature of these relationships that suggest they possess an 'autonomous life,' the emotional reflection of which is the coming together after much searching. Rich describes this return in the following way:

I think that's quite beautiful to think that they [Tim and John] were very young love, they were at school. They had a lot of challenges in their life obviously because of that era, but then they still chose to make that commitment to live with each other and see their days out together. So, I think that's a beautiful thing too. (Rich)

Even after all the hardship and adversity Tim and John had faced, they still ended their days together, surely a demonstration of the importance of the relationship, one of the key features, according to Simmel ([1908]1950), of faithfulness. As we have seen, the stories of Tim and John had a lasting impact on the stories of the participants. As Ken Plummer has said, these 'stories of suffering, surviving and surpassing', which 'tell of a need for action - something must be done, a pain must be transcended' (1995: 50). Mike suggests that much may be learned in this regard from the stories of Tim and John:

Going back to that time when Tim and John [were] negotiating different life paths, and coming together later on, it was that allowance of being able to give space for each other to, and the trust that even by giving

space there is a sense of intimacy and a sense of connectedness that still exists. I think that's quite powerful...it's good to see that this story went through the whole life course, of a relationship. And I would hope in some ways that these kind of narratives can be more central in the way we talk about what it means to be gay, having relationships or negotiating relationships in this current age. (Mike)

The next section explores the ways in which the participants in this study interwove the stories from the autobiographical and fictive texts with their own stories, or their autobiographies. The participants took references from these cultural texts to interpret their own experiences and resolve struggles related to intimacy and love.

### **Interweaving of narratives**

It just shows they're not just a bunch of faggots. It's, they're human and they, they have lives...they're in love with each other. The most power[ful] thing is him watching his partner die in front of him for months, you know. He was falling apart. It was just devastating. (Kelvin)

Fictive and autobiographical texts have been shown to provide valuable insights into social processes and our social lives. Mary Evans argues, for example, that the works of Jane Austen tell us something about the Enlightenment approach to love, that is: 'love could be understood and was as much a matter of rational thought as it was of passion and sexual desire' (2003: 28). Similarly, Evans reasons that the works of Mary Shelley suggest an opposing view, that love 'should always be spontaneous and never controlled or structured by social norms' (Evans, 2003: 28).

*Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995) and  *Brokeback Mountain*  (Proulx, 1999) were used by participants to offer insights to their own narratives of romantic love. Participants related their own experiences to the experiences of characters in fictive and non-fictive texts, the narratives of romance and love becoming intertwined with the participants' own. The etymological origins of the word 'romance' are intensified in this context and participants identified key features of these texts, appealing to them in thinking about their own narratives. Art for example, described  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995) in

the following way: 'I do think one of the reasons why it was popular as a book and a movie is this idea of portraying a very long and loving relationship, you know, they really play on that romance idea.' Art related closely to Tim's expression of the intricacies of romantic love, he himself having published some work of auto/biography: 'the autobiographical voice is a really powerful narrative' (Art). Mike too relates to the powerful nature of these romance narratives, describing them as something for which he had been searching:

And it [Holding the Man] was really one of those stories that had a strong grip on me. And so, I look back in some of my diaries, actually. I never write them anymore, but back then it was interesting this kind of down memory lane process. It had quite a strong impact on me in the way that, again, that search of narratives that are potential possibilities in your life.  
(Mike)

This is a clear statement of the significance of the narratives in the autobiographical and fictive texts for the respondents. As Mike explains, such narratives had been very important in shaping his own narratives of love and romance:

So, growing up the narratives that I'm exposed to is very much heterosexual and you tend to see yourself or not see yourself represented in those kind of narratives, and the archetypical Disney princess with the prince kind of thing. And that comes to mind as my first kind of model on what romance or love, or relationship could be. And, as naive as that is, I think there was a lot of transferred kind of ideas into how I saw relationships back then and, in this idea of intimacy is finding the one.  
(Mike)

Again, as for Art, this idea of 'finding the one' is described by Mike as important in his narrative of romance and love. Mike reflects further on the impact of *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995):

I think he [Conigrave] definitely gave a lot of words, a kind of intimate portrayal of what intimacy looks like between them [Conigrave and

Caleo]. And I thought that was quite powerful...to go through one single narrative with just one person in the book I think that gave a very intense insight into what intimacy means for him and that was quite powerful for me to take home as well. There is I guess, a sense of a definite possibility that my life could be explored in this way, in this kind of intimate extreme. This kind of intenseness as well. And that gave me some kind of, well, excitement! The storyline was very much about the trials and tribulations. So that gave a sense of, direction. So, a reference point for me. So, I feel intimacy is very central. (Mike)

Both Mike's and Art's expressions of their feelings about *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) resonate with what Ken Plummer calls the 'textual search: a scanning of the stories available to help see who one is' (Plummer, 1995: 85). While Plummer may be more specifically referring to coming out stories, in many ways, Mike and Art used at least some of the experiences of Tim and John to figure out who they were, and indeed, what they wanted.

Auto/biography is one way of 'sustaining an integrated sense of self' (Giddens, 1991: 76). The participants in this study used the experiences of Tim and John in *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) to amplify their own experiences, their autobiographies. As Giddens suggests, this was a form of creative input, as one would find with other formalised narratives (Giddens, 1991: 76). This input took several forms. At the broadest level, participants reported feeling akin to the experiences on the basis of shared sexuality. Phillip for example, said:

I think people would find it easier to relate to, well I think as a gay man, you'd find it easier to relate because you'd have some sort of similar or shared experience to some extent and the context in which that's written I guess that you're not necessarily having to pick up themes, you can relate directly to the types of images. (Phillip)

At a more specific level, participants spoke of the familiarity of Tim's and John's stories particularly as they related to HIV. Rich for example, worked on the ward in which Tim and John were inpatients at different times. Rich tells his story in the following way:

[Holding the Man] took me back in time. That's what it did for me. It made me realise the days of St Vincent's Hospital and reminded me, the day that we opened the ward up, the first patients that we got, the families. And it just made me realise that I went through that process from day one when it first was announced...And those days were really bad days...no-one knew anything about it [HIV]. It just hit us. It seemed like it just hit us overnight. We were a 32-bed ward and we were packed every day. People were going to the mortuary on a daily basis, and you were seeing people coming in that you were out and about in Oxford Street with. So, it seemed to hit really quick and fast, and take people very quickly. So, for me it took me back to those days when we were there. (Rich)

Similarly, Keegan reflected on his own reading of *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) in relation to his experience of HIV:

I was of an age where hopefully, you know, I could slide through and not get HIV if I was sensible about it - that's sort of demeaning. I shouldn't say sensible...10 years older or 20 years older, I would have been of those guys. So, in a way, I was grateful to have this insight, and there's a legacy there, you don't want to be that. You don't want that to happen to you. You're in a position where you can control yourself. Control it happening to you. So, in a way, I was sort of grateful for it...Because it was a huge warning. (Keegan)

Keegan put himself in the place of Tim and John – had Keegan been a bit older, he may well have found himself in the same situation. It seems that Keegan's auto/biography is also shaped by the stories of Tim and John. While on one hand, this may sound like an abstract musing, on the other, it is in fact a story produced in a social context by a real person about their everyday experience (Plummer, 1995: 16).

For other participants, there was a more general sense that their stories were much like Tim's and John's, but this also hinged on the experience with HIV, not only, however, the

sexual elements of the illness – but the grief associated with it also figures largely in this narrative (Plummer, 1995: 15). Mike for example, spoke about this likeness of narratives in the following way:

Again, that search of narratives that are potential possibilities in your life. There was a very strong sense that I'm always on the lookout back then for what it means for a gay person to go into, you know, being HIV positive or coming into the scene, live in this country. It's all very new and, in many ways, I'm searching for what I can be or what is aspirational. I found this story [Holding the Man] and it was painful reading it. It was just heart-breaking. And to read those lines and know that I'm stepping out in the same city and the same streets, Potts Point, all these settings that you are, I am here. And he, he volunteered. I think he worked in ACON as well. So, there was that sense of I guess lineage, if you may. That same kind of circles or, I don't know, geographical location. So, to see that being panned out in his book in very intimate terms his relationship with his partner was quite painful...towards the end of the book, the graphic details of how they went through AIDS, that's something that I never forget. And I guess looking at that it's quite instructive, because nowadays you don't see many if not any person suffering from and dying from AIDS, really, the illnesses anymore. (Mike)

Mike had worked for ACON (formerly AIDS Council of New South Wales), had lived in the same locale as John and Tim, from which he drew a sense, much like Keegan, that Tim and John were just like him. Matt described a very similar feeling:

I was very overwhelmed and quite emotional because I could see a lot of my situation [Holding the Man]. And I suppose when you do relate to something that's when you're a bit more emotional and connected with it. So maybe that's one of the reasons why I don't watch these films cause it is the only second one I've seen and I remember with the other one we saw, Broken, whatever it's called, [Brokeback Mountain] it was the same scenario... It just rehashes past wounds that I sort of feel like I'd moved on from. But they're obviously there underneath and seeing those things hashes it all up. (Matt)



Matt talks about some of his own experiences of loss and estrangement, relating them to Tim's and John's, much like Mike's earlier comments about how the 'raw' feelings he experienced were related to the same narratives he saw in the book. For other participants, there was a much more general appreciation for the familiarity of the stories. There was a relatability in the simple things that Tim and John and the participants enjoyed. Josh described this in the following way:

He [Tim] sort of enjoyed having guy friends and like hugging his guy friends like it was always comforting to him and I suppose I wasn't so much into the – the hugging part, but I always did like having guys as friends like I always thought they were kind of cute, and I never thought of – of girls like that – like I enjoyed being around boys and you know, having our shirts off and pissing together and whatever like doing boy stuff. I sort of related to that at the start like I thought yeah, I used to think things like this and this is quite comforting to read, because this guy thought similar things. (Josh)

Comparing similar circumstances was a common theme for the participants. The importance of drawing from the stories of 'significant others' cannot be overstated – these tales may in fact be 'fundamental shapers of a life story' (Plummer, 1995: 39). The participants described deriving a sense of comfort in drawing from these other stories. This theme emerged in their coming-out stories. Matt for example, compared his southern European upbringing and coming-out story to that of John's (John came from an Italian family):

I still hadn't come out directly to my parents, even though I've come out to all my friends and things like that. So, my coming from a [southern European] background, it's that exact sort of environment. You know what I mean? [Yeah] So even though I feel my parents know, it's something that's never discussed. So, it's just, it, it doesn't exist...So it's like, 'I don't wanna know that part of it,' so that has been very hard for me because obviously you want to share all these experiences with your family and I haven't had that opportunity. (Matt)

John did not so much have difficulty coming out to his parents and family, but the ramifications of this, particularly the response from his father, was very difficult to manage. Matt's partner Rich, tells a very different story – his story is in fact much like Tim's:

I s'pose my circumstance is a little bit different. My father was a CEO at St Vincent's Hospital so he employed a lot of gay people. So, my parents were very open about the whole gay scene, living in Darlinghurst. They used to have a lot of dinner parties, entertainment, things like that, so I s'pose for my circumstances I didn't have to live in the closet. It was when I was 16 that my parents told me that, 'We know you're gay and we accept you no differently to your brothers and sisters. And you live your life the way that they do.' So, for me it was a very easy transition for me - I've been open for as long as I can remember. (Rich)

Matt and Rich saw many other points of similarity in their own experiences with the stories in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995). The following exchange illustrates how Matt in particular, read these similarities into his own narrative:

Matt: Well I think their situation is almost identical to our situation. I'm John and you're the other guy - Tim - because, yeah, well you're a lot more experienced; John wasn't. You know what I mean?

Rich: Oh, I think our backgrounds are very similar.

Matt: You've done everything, I haven't. Like, but I'm content. You know what I mean? And John was content. He was happy with what he had. He didn't want anything more.

Matt is making specific reference here to the part of Tim's and John's story in which Tim says he wants an open relationship. Matt also thought about the part of their story in which John's family take over every aspect of John's life as he becomes gravely ill. He relates this to the measures he and Rich have taken to avoid such a circumstance:

Knowing that if something was to happen and to me first, they [Matt's family] would not understand. They would not, have never known and probably never accept Rich as part of, like being a part of my life. So, they probably would not be there. So, we've made precautions to make sure that he has the overall right and, yeah, he can override them. (Matt)

Mike, much like Matt, spoke of discordance in a relationship – a situation in which he and his partner felt differently about monogamy:

Definitely, I see myself going through a period where I felt I wanted to settle in the relationship and things were going well, but then my ex kind of wanted to go away and experience more. And he's quite new in relationships. And he has I guess not done the rounds maybe, if you wanna put it that way. And so, it's sort of kind of coming to closure and okayness about that as well in looking at this particular moment Tim and John had negotiated. I think maybe there was definitely a kind of identical, identical kind of narrative there. (Mike)

It is indeed remarkable how similar the narratives of John and Tim and the participants are. Kelvin even identifies himself with John:

Well there's Tims everywhere... Do you know what I mean?... It hurts people, but people have that ability to switch that off and just continue doing what they're doing, regardless of what someone else thinks...And I just thought John was beautiful. (Kelvin)

This close identification of the reader with the text is one of the key sites from which the participants drew meaning, which leads to a final, broader point about the autobiographical text. These narratives are not generated in a vacuum, as it were. Rather, they feed into real (or imagined) social worlds (Plummer, 1995: 45). Sociologically, it is important to also examine 'the social and historical conditions that facilitate the making and hearing of stories' (Plummer, 1995: 45). Art articulates this really clearly in his analysis of  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995):

No, there's something that is very sweet about that, you know, the Australian gay community adopted this book as this is the Australian story. There are many stories told in the US. I don't know if there is a Canadian story, but, you know, this was the Australian story and the Australian community grabbed it, and the book, and then the play, and now the movie, so yeah. (Art)

*Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995) is now internationally proliferate, but Art's comment speaks to the significance of the local context and the meanings derived. The themes in the stories have universal reach, but an intensified meaning is drawn from the relatability of social and historical contexts in which they are located.

In this chapter, we have seen how the individual love stories of the participants aid in resolving struggles around sex and intimacy, a pluralistic approach which allows for different types of relationships. Several dimensions of intimacy were explored – trust and mutual disclosure were narrated by participants as elemental in their search for, and finding of, intimacy. For these participants, answers to questions about intimacy and love were found in the fictive and autobiographical texts, meanings drawn from the search for stories to which the participants could closely relate. Auto/biography, a means for securing a narrative of self, was used by these participants to tell their stories of love and intimacy within specific social contexts. These stories were often troubled and, in narrating these difficulties, relating them to the characters in the auto/biography, the participants revealed the significance of intimacy and love in their lives. The autobiographical text had a special mark of familiarity, given its social and historical context. It is with the life and times of these stories with which we conclude.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion



In review of the data presented, we revisit some of the theory regarding intimacy, and its transformation, considered earlier in the thesis. We revisit and question the idea that, especially for gay men, the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1991; 1992) captures the whole picture. We also question the idea that this more democratised form of relationship is, if not impossible, then highly-unlikely (Jamieson, 1998). Using the evidence provided by the participants, we point to the ways in which these men have come to some accord with the troubled nature of intimacy – through love. Pressing questions of the time are foreshadowed as areas for further investigation. Marriage equality and a more 'normal' life are two areas that warrant further exploration within this approach to understanding love. Finally, we consider what might be the new frontier in understanding intimacy and intimate relationships that might not conform to the Disney-style fairy tale.

One way of understanding intimacy suggests that intimacy is achieved through trust and mutual disclosure (Giddens, 1991; 1992). Such intimacy, however, can prove fragile as it involves open dialogue and full disclosure, meaning that one's faults are on show all of the time. When relationships built on this kind of intimacy fail to deliver sufficient rewards for both parties, the natural course is for the relationship to end. An assumption within this model of intimacy is that two people enter a relationship as equals and that they have sufficient means to not have to worry about day-to-day struggles over resources. Another understanding of intimacy contends that rarely is this the case (Jamieson, 1998). Within this understanding, daily struggles of survival can become constitutive of the relationship itself (Jamieson, 1998).

In the case of the first understanding, when we consider the stories of the participants in this study, Keegan's story suggests that indeed, when trust is broken and full disclosure upsets a balance, then the relationship ends. Keegan found his former partner at home readying himself for sex games, a practice of which Keegan had no

knowledge, hence Keegan broke off that relationship. Similarly, Kelvin spoke about how he has an open dialogue with intimate others if he feels that the relationship is not heading in the direction he wants. Their stories are a clear illustration of the properties of intimate relationships that Giddens (1991; 1992) ascribes to these relationships in late modernity. On the other hand, however, Dave's relationship characterises the second understanding of intimacy, one in which the intimate relationship is not the coming together of two autonomous individuals. Although he was no longer in a sexual relationship with his partner, Dave stayed with him to care for him. For Dave and his former partner, there was certainly a material imperative in them staying together. Dave did of course love and care for his former partner, but their combined material resources were greater than the sum of its parts. Dave and his former partner were both considerably dependent on income and housing support, largely because Dave was his former partner's carer. In this context, pooling their limited resources made good financial sense.

Participants in this study reported that looking for intimacy, a key concern for all participants, in contexts where so much confusion existed over sex and intimacy, was filled with many emotional and mental disappointments. For some participants, Keegan and Mike, for example, intimacy could be achieved in casual sexual relations, while for others, there was a general sense that these casual sexual encounters do not belong in the context of intimate relationships. Josh, Rich and Matt for example, said that if one was happy in their relationship, why would one want to have any sexual affairs outside of the relationship. Overall, what underpinned all discussion of intimacy was an idea suggested by Ben: that gay men, particularly because of certain elements of the 'scene,' have a troubled relationship with intimacy. Often intimacy is sought in places where it is not likely to be found, and confusion over the roles of sex and intimacy persists, even in the context of multiple understandings of the 'ground rules' for intimate relationships more generally. In other words, while one version of intimacy among gay men suggests that it is the casual divorce of sex and intimacy that makes sexual relations so uninhibited, another version suggests that no such facile distinction can be made.

A strikingly strong theme, however, involved the centrality of love in reconciling these apparent contradictions between sex and intimacy. Keegan spoke about this

extensively, saying that, above all, regardless of the actual 'goings-on' in a relationship, the most important thing was that nobody was hurting. Rich spoke about how he had been open to Matt going 'exploring' when Matt first came out, because he knew that if Matt loved him, he would come back to him. These stories speak to the more rational nature of loving relationships and of a kind of intellectual to-ing and fro-ing (Evans, 2003) that characterises a loving relationship not formed through the traditional, commercialised romance tale. It is not rational for one to want others to hurt, for indeed that only hurts oneself, nor is it rational to hold someone back from doing what they will probably do anyway.

The participants' stories of confusion about intimacy, and of love, melded with the stories in fictive and autobiographical texts. Much like John in *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995), participants spoke about how they found it confusing that Tim wanted to have sexual affairs outside of his and John's relationship, and yet they could see that, in the end, John and Tim shared a deep love for one another. Their relationship suggests faithfulness too, for it is when passion gets in the way of a relationship, that faithfulness secures it (Simmel, [1908]1950). Participants used autobiographical accounts, as a means of securing a consistent sense of identity (Giddens, 1991), to narrate how they felt their own stories intersected with the stories of the characters in the fictive and autobiographical texts. While the narratives of the participants were highly influenced by these cultural narratives, at the same time, they expressed a sense of 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck, 2000) in the ways they spoke about their own intimate relationships. Some participants used this 'do-it-yourself biography' to manage family relations. For example, Matt spoke at length about how, because of his family's cultural traditions, in which being gay was shunned, he had made a new story for himself and his partner Rich. Other participants spoke about how they wrote their own scripts around intimacy. Josh and Kelvin for example, spoke about how they valued monogamy, despite the prominent narrative in the 'gay' scene.

Within these narratives of love were stories of great highs and lows in the participants' intimate relationships. These stories spoke of how there was ongoing negotiation in maintaining these relationships, a kind of Socratic dialogue (Evans, 2003) that kept loving relationships alive. As Ken Plummer (1995) has said, stories breed stories. The

importance of these men's love stories lies precisely in this: in the same way that the love story of Tim and John has influenced how many of us wrote our own love stories, so perhaps the participants' stories might brighten the path for other gay men.

Even well into the new millennium, this message is still important. There remains a paradox: on the one hand, gay is more acceptable now than perhaps ever before in modern times. 'Gay is so different now. Like it's so mainstream,' said Keegan. And yet, on the other hand, Art said:

I do think there is something still to be said after all of the progress that we've gone through, social change, and how things seem normal these days where people can live an openly gay life, I still think our hurts run deep and I don't know whether that will go away. There are a lot of people who have suffered very deep hurts from their family or society which I believe prevent us from forming long relationships in some cases, without role modelling, without support, or other deep stuff. (Art)

This is perhaps why the symbolism of marriage equality is so important. For many gay men, and women no doubt, marriage would be the final confirmation that their sex and intimacy is as good as that of straight couples. Similarly, that their love and faithfulness is also experienced in equal measure. In Australia, marriage equality was passed into Commonwealth law late in 2017. This was not before, however, a national postal vote in which 38% of respondents voted 'no' to marriage equality. Marriage equality was described by participants as interrupting the social order:

I can't deny the symbolic importance [of marriage equality]. Marriage as a religious institution strikes to the core of the culture of how people understand how they should live, how communities should live, and subverting that and changing that to allow gays and lesbians to get married, it really is a shock to their system. (Art)

However, in other similar societies, Canada for example, marriage equality has been a source of social solidarity. Art speaks about this in the following way:



[Marriage equality] has been symbolically important for years and it's in so many countries around the world, it's just easy...the idea that it's been legal in Canada for 10 years is ridiculous. I mean, the country hasn't fallen apart. It's so normalised there. There is nothing unusual for us to get married among my friends, my friends' kids. The idea that we're so integrated in society in Canada, I thought it's fabulous how normal it is. (Art)

'Normal' is a word that Art used often to describe the changes that have happened in societies like Canada and Australia that now allow for adoption, assistance with reproductive technology and other markers of a 'normal' family life. At the same time, he said however, 'I don't know whether people have caught up.' This ambivalence regarding the chasm between public policy positions and the day-to-day experiences of gay men and women illustrates the symbolic, and for some, material, importance of marriage equality. It also signifies the increasingly fluid nature of what constitutes understandings of what 'normal' is. In the context of this thesis, the analysis of a life more ordinary was briefly explored through the experiences of participants who reported feeling they were just like the rest of their neighbours, living a 'normal' life. Part of this normality they described as being just like other 'normal' married couples.

There are persuasive arguments against 'gay' marriage on the basis that marriage, as an institution, inscribes gay men and women within structures that have historically proved discriminatory and divisive. Michael Warner (1999b: 149) provides solid detail of these arguments, suggesting that in some ways, a vision of long-term social change is forgotten or worse, ignored, in current debates about marriage equality. Another view, described by Warner as a 'truism' (1999b: 148) is that marriage should be a question for the individual, and that there is no need to couple broader implications to it. This view rang true for Art, who said:

I don't agree with the curmudgeonly older activists these days who are still trotting out the same arguments about how marriage shouldn't be important, well just 'cause they don't want to get married, that's fine, then they don't have to get gay married at all. (Art)

This kind of approach may be, as Warner has suggested, ‘hopelessly reductive’ (1999b: 148) in terms of seeing marriage solely as a matter of state and norms. Nonetheless, this was the experience of the participants in this study. Matt and Rich spoke, for example, about how they didn’t really care what the state had to say about their marriage, except to say that it would be nice for the state to sanction it. The discourse in the most recent Australian debate about marriage equality, from the side of the proponents, has been that all love is equal, and that on the day of the results of the postal vote (a majority ‘yes’ vote) love trumped hate. The proponents proclaimed that this was a victory for freedom, for young people and most importantly, for love. Perhaps it is not only the institutional recognition of love shared by gay couples that was so profound, but also the message that we are worthy of loving, faithful, happy relationships. Keegan talks about exactly this when he relates a story about attending the Royal Albert Hall during London Pride week just after legislation in the UK changed to facilitate marriage equality:

They got people to stand up, how many people had been married in the past year and there was a lot of people, and you see a lot of people how proud they were about that level of status that they’d achieved and they didn’t want to go back to how things were before, ‘cause a lot of people think, when you’re coming out, I’ll never get married. (Keegan)

Keegan’s observation roundly summarises a moment of lasting social change. In times to come, maybe people will have ‘caught up’ and there will be new battle lines drawn (Seidman, 2004). Participants in this study pointed towards a new frontier:

The interesting thing in the last few years obviously is the transgender moment that’s been happening. I mean, it’s incredible to me just to see, being lesbian and gay is just kind of old hat...in contemporary Sydney and Melbourne, boring, there’s nothing special about it, so it’s moved on – the new advocacy is all about transgender issues. (Art)

There remains a paradox however, for ‘boring’ gay men, in that there still remains a simmering sense that as public policy moves forward for greater inclusiveness and freedom in our intimate relationships, the broader public needs to ‘keep up.’ We

witnessed over the course of the past forty or so years, vast changes in societal acceptance of gay men and women, and now state-recognition of relationships in the form of marriage equality. On the day, love trumped hate, but this has been a long time coming, and I am not sure the project is yet complete. As the participants in this study have shown, there is still a level of confusion about the meanings of sex and intimacy, hinged upon the paradox above. Therefore, there remains fertile ground for investigating exactly what these debates around 'normal' and marriage equality might mean, and how issues of transgender can be incorporated into the discussion. Further research could also unlock the love stories of transgender people and how they are expressed in auto/biography and fiction.

As with all qualitative studies of this nature, the data should be interpreted as a snapshot of the lives of the participants, and provides a small insight into their experiences. While there was a degree of diversity in material resources among the participants, all had adequate resources for a modest yet comfortable life. While the sample was small, this study does illustrate how closely integrated the love stories of the participants were with the narratives they read in the autobiographical and fictive texts. This integration indicates that literature, both autobiographical and fiction, can often correspond and resonate with the day-to-day of people's lived experience, suggesting that works of fiction and auto/biography should not be discounted as valuable sources of sociological observation.



## ADDENDUM

### A bit on the side: unlocking the love stories of gay men



At the time of submission of the main thesis, in December 2017, the federal Parliament of Australia had just voted in favour of a legislation change that would allow the marriages of same-sex couples to be recognised by the State, providing same-sex couples with all the affordances previously only applied to marriages of opposite-sex couples. An examiner noted, among other comments, that while these events were mentioned briefly, there was scope for further examination of the same-sex marriage debate in Australia. The reviewer also noted that there was scope to further contemporise the thesis by drawing on debates around the ways in which technologies such as digital applications for gay men to meet one another, or hookup apps, may mediate experiences of sex, intimacy and love. This addendum seeks to further arguments made in the thesis about intimacy and love among gay men by examining the emerging literature on the influences of hookup apps and how some of the participants described their experiences with this technology. The addendum also seeks to examine some of the implications of marriage equality legislation and its significance, or otherwise, in the stories of the participants.

The plethora of hookup apps, gay and straight, is not only emblematic of the incursions of digital technology in the day-to-day lives of many people, but also points towards the individualising tendencies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Despite the presence in the market place of apps targeting specific audiences – Scruff for example targets men who are sexually-attracted to older, more ‘masculine’ men – the original hookup app for gay men, Grindr, remains popular (Ahlm, 2017). For many gay men, cruising, sex in public places and bathhouse culture declined in popularity with the onset and spectre of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s (Berube, 1996; Colter, 1996; D’Emilio and Freedman, 2012). Indeed, in the nearly ten years since the arrival of Grindr, the largest body of scholarship examining gay hookup apps is devoted to using Grindr as a sexual health surveillance and education tool (Goedel and Duncan, 2015), with a specific focus on HIV

prevention (Redina et al., 2014; Winetrobe et al., 2014). It is perhaps therefore somewhat paradoxical that apps like Grindr are harnessed to study one of the very reasons they were invented. As Jody Ahlm has suggested, apps like Grindr ‘play with the boundaries of public and private’ (2017: 365), arguing also that the apps allow navigation of stigmatised sexual activity, producing a ‘respectable promiscuity’ (2017: 364). Of course, these apps are not restricted to gay men – Grindr has a sister called Blendr, designed for straight women. Nonetheless, it is difficult not to think that in many ways, apps such as Grindr and Scruff have implications for the public presentation of intimate relationships between gay men.

Much of the opposition to marriage equality legislation in Australia – and I restrict the examination here to gay men – relied on the familiar argument that intimate relations between gay men were unnatural and should therefore not be sanctioned by marriage. This is a common theme that has been examined in other jurisdictions around the time of the introduction of marriage equality legislation (Armenia and Troia, 2017; O’Connor, 2017). The advocates for marriage equality in Australia centred their arguments upon an ‘equal love’ platform. For these groups, the fight was about equality for all before the Australian law. This equality was to be found in recognition of love as it may be lived-out in marriage. In many senses then, this represented a move to have love between gay men recognised publicly, and to a degree, codified by the mechanisms of the state. Questions may arise therefore about exactly how much individual gay men may want, or *need*, this public ‘approval’ of their relationships. It has been argued by many (Butler, 2002; Warner, 1999a; Weeks, 1995; Yip, 1997 to name a few) that marriage in fact reinscribes gay men within the very social structures they have so long resisted. This debate is important to consider with the ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens, 1991; 1992) in the foreground, given that it is the pure relationship that promised a democratisation of the personal sphere which did not require marriage.

In the main body of this thesis, the critical importance of the participants’ love stories was examined. These love stories aided the participants in understanding their day-to-day experiences. Anthony Giddens’ ‘pure relationship’ (1991; 1992) was offered as one way of analysing the relationships within these stories. ‘Confluent love’ and ‘plastic sexuality’ (Giddens, 1992) described many of the participants’ experiences, especially as

they reflected on their love stories. This reflexivity in turn affected their questioning of who they were and how they should live (Giddens, 1992: 198, in Bittman and Pixley, 1997). Social relations change over time and as such, a revision of these analyses was required. The debate for example, around marriage equality reached its crescendo in late 2017 in Australia. As campaigning for marriage equality was almost entirely based on the platform of equal love, it is important to closely examine how this debate might frame love and its narration. Similarly, a closer examination of the individualising tendencies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> was required, especially as they may relate to an era when mobile dating technologies and hookup apps mediate intimate relationships of all kinds.

In this addendum, some of the data related to the participants' observations of the era of digital hook-ups, the implications for love and the tension between equality before the law and public 'approval' are explored. The centrality of love in the stories of the participants is as evident as before. Reflections on contemporary debates around the significance of the return to state-sanctioned intimate relationships are examined.

### **Digital culture and sex**

While hookup apps can provide the opportunity for anonymous sex, anonymous sex between men is not a new phenomenon. Laud Humphreys (1970) chronicled anonymous sex between men in public places in the late 1960s. Decades later, this controversial work was revisited (Nardi, 1995), and its contribution to a nascent field of gay studies celebrated. At about the same time, Anthony Giddens was writing about the 'creation of plastic sexuality, severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations' (1992: 27), lending the foundation for the sexual revolution of the 1970s and 1980s. Upon this basis, it is timely to examine how hookup apps may mediate the very affairs about which Humphreys wrote nearly fifty years ago.

Grindr remains one of the most popular hookup apps (Ahlm, 2017). On the face of it, Grindr would seem to be a hookup-for-sex app (Tziallas, 2015). After all, the largest proportion of images of users on the Grindr grid lean towards a *'hypersexualised*

masculinity' (Bonner-Thompson, 2017: 1613) in which exposed flesh, and particularly of the torso, is removed from a context, a bar or beach for example, giving 'rise to the hypersexualised embodiment' (Bonner-Thompson, 2017: 1613). There are however other dimensions to the app and other online resources for gay men to meet other gay men. In a large study of gay men's online social capital, friendship-seeking and generalised sociability figured just as importantly as any sexual motive in using online sources for meeting (Wilkinson et al., 2012: 1169).

Data from the main body of the thesis also illustrated ways in which the participants used hookup apps for more than meeting for sex. 'Negotiating relationships' appeared as a common thread, friendships prominent among these relationships. In one Australian study, almost two-thirds of participants reported that 'they found friends when they had actually gone looking for sex' (Wilkinson et al., 2012: 1169).

Nonetheless, participants described a sense that 'there's a commodification of these exchanges' (Mike) because the exchanges are not as 'deep' as exchanges of the past. In recent work in the US (Chan, 2018), participants expressed ambivalence about this 'networked intimacy' (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017; Chan, 2018), identifying some of the outcomes of the use of this technology as akin to broader patterns of consumption logics that have infiltrated online dating (Bauman, 2003).

On the one hand, it could be argued that this ambivalence expresses a sort of 'nostalgia for the days of public cruising' (Ahlm, 2017, 366), when gay men used to meet, face-to-face in bars and clubs, and discover one another's personhood through conversation. On the other, this is perhaps unwittingly referencing Zygmunt Bauman's (2003) contestation that unbridled individualisation and technological innovation has transformed 'modern courtship into a type of commodified game' (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017: 271). As Bauman (2003) has suggested, technologies, such as hookup apps, and individualising tendencies, have fundamentally altered courtship rituals, in large part because they can be conducted at a safe distance – remotely. Data from the main thesis show how these 'remote' exchanges are a way of managing vulnerabilities, again echoing an ambivalence about the ambiguities of the relationships that may arise from the 'exchanges' (Chan, 2018). Data from the main thesis suggests that love stories, such as that found in  *Holding the Man*  (Conigrave, 1995), the stimulus text used for the

research, can be influential in negotiating relationships in 'this current age of Grindr exchanges' (Mike).

For example, in Mike's story, set out in the earlier part of the thesis, there is a certain wistfulness. It suggests that Mike misses the more personal engagement that he observed in the love story of Tim and John, and that something important may have been lost in the way relationships are formed and sustained in the digital age of sexual encounters. Despite being only about thirty years old at the time of interview, Mike's comments evinced a yearning for a relationship similar to that of Tim and John, almost as if it were in fact a distant memory. Matthew Hobbs and colleagues have suggested that a 'digital revolution' (2017: 272) is currently underway, fundamentally altering the role of 'traditional matchmakers' (2017: 272), such as the family and friends, as well as that of dating agencies and 'personals' (Quiroz, 2013; Slater, 2013). Indeed there is evidence that as many as 70% of same-sex couples met online rather than face-to-face (Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012: 530). This may of course be reflective of how people meet for romantic and other reasons more broadly (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017), suggesting that these apps have multiple purposes.

As the traditional anchors to others, marriage and strong kinship ties for example, fall away, we experience a never-ending array of choices in how we conduct our personal lives, a process which makes these traditional relations *flimsy* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Love moves from more romantic notions to 'confluent love' (Giddens, 1992: 2) – love that is contingent and guided by the mutual pleasure each party derives from the relationship. According to Anthony Giddens, this expression of love provides both freedoms and frailties. The *pure relationship* (Giddens, 1992) representing this late-modern way of intimately relating, means that the relationship continues as long as both parties derive benefits from it. Bauman (2003) contended that it is precisely under these conditions – unfettered individualism and rapid technological change – that love *liquifies*. He suggested that as interactions are mediated by technology, fleeting associations become the norm (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017: 274). Much like Mike suggested, the "Don't waste my time!" Block of internet and app 'dating' means that at any time, the individual may choose to 'press delete' (Bauman, 2003: 65).



There is evidence to suggest however that this account of intimate relationships in late modernity may be 'too pessimistic' (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017: 271). The apps such as Grindr may open up more romantic possibilities for 'thin markets' (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017: 274), particularly if a man may not be 'out' (Blackwell et al., 2015). While on one hand, hook-up apps may represent a 'no strings attached' encounter, on the other, there may also be an 'overflowing' effect (Race, 2015: 501), in which the casual, 'no strings attached' encounter may 'spill over into other types of relations' (Race, 2015: 501). For others, these apps may provide a way of seeking one's 'soul-mate' (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008; Couch and Liamputtong, 2008; Goluboff, 2015; Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017; Meenagh, 2015).

When this 'overflowing' effect occurs, the original 'no strings attached' frame of the app encounter may be 'variously rejected, reconfigured, re-embedded or confounded by participants; they become subject to various forms of overflowing' (Race, 2015: 496). In other words, the app-mediated encounter may open new ways of relating, new forms of intimacy and other sources of fulfilment. As Wilkinson and colleagues (2012) have shown, these kinds of technologies may be equally used for finding friends and other personal ties, reaching beyond the original purpose of the technology itself. Ambivalence too about what constitutes 'gay community' (Holt, 2011) may be driving the use of these technologies in the search for personal attachments (Wilkinson et al., 2012). A reframing of 'what collective sexual life could become' (Davis et al., 2016: 849) may open new possibilities in understanding these hookup technologies and the 'related capacities for connection with others' (Davis et al., 2016: 849).

Only recently has empirical work begun on the implications of the use of these apps for the relationships of partnered gay men (Macapagal et al., 2016; McKie, Lachowsky and Milhausen, 2015). The evidence is mixed. Raymond McKie and colleagues found for example that among young gay men, use of the internet more generally, and to a degree, apps like Grindr, had a positive influence in their lives (McKie, Lachowsky and Milhausen, 2015). These technologies allowed for 'finding and filtering partners, sexual facilitation, relationship development and maintenance, ending relationships, communication, and identity development' (McKie, Lachowsky and Milhausen, 2015:

19). This was not however in the specific context of gay men who were partnered. Kathryn Macapagal and colleagues (2016) found that while there were benefits associated with app use in partnered couples, improving communication and filling unmet sexual needs for example, there were also drawbacks. These included jealousy and app use as a 'distraction' (Macapagal, 2016: 1513) from the relationship.

Macapagal and colleagues found that a key drawback to app use in partnered couples was a lack of trust (2016: 1519). Trust is something that needs to be worked at in order to achieve intimacy (Giddens, 1991: 96). Discussion of trust is often situated within conversations about HIV prevention (Prestage et al., 2006; Prestage et al., 2008; Zablotska et al., 2011). Data from the main thesis regarding trust however suggests a broader concern about personal emotional welfare and fulfilment, a way of achieving, or working towards, a 'dyadic wholeness' (Worth, Reid and McMillan, 2002: 241). This concern is reflective of a 'meeting of souls' (Giddens, 1992: 45), a way of becoming whole (Giddens, 1992: 45).

In the main body of the thesis, the love stories of the participants featured prominently, not in the stereotypically-depicted way, but in how they made sense of society, impelled by feelings of trust and commitment. Love too appears only once in the study of dating apps in partnered couples (Macapagal, 2016: 1519). This is not to say of course that love may not arise from the app encounters, for as we saw earlier, there may be an 'overflowing' effect (Race, 2015: 496). Emerging at the same time as analysis of plastic sexuality and confluent love (Giddens, 1992) was Kath Weston's work related to families of choice (Weston, 1991). In this, and later work, Weston shows how non-biological kinship emerges for gay men and women, moving away from the 'conditional love' (Weston, 1991: 61) that sometimes attends biological ties, towards ties 'marked by the suffuse, enduring solidarity called "love."' (Weston, 1995). The narrative of love – that gay men and women can have 'loving' intimate relationships – has also been deployed in legal contexts, much as it was during the campaign for marriage equality in Australia, for some years now (Fajer, 1991). Jeffrey Weeks and colleagues (2001) explore the everyday experiences of gay men and women, including their stories of love, and how the storytellers' day-to-day is mediated by their homosexuality and loving partnerships. They argue that despite the gains in social acceptance of homosexuality

seen over the past generation, and increased awareness of diversity, nonetheless there has not been 'full acceptance or validation' (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan, 2001: 41-42). In a more recent review (Gudelunas, 2012) of the reasons gay men might use hookup apps, love is not mentioned once. That which requires further attention therefore is how stories of love may be experienced and mediated by these technologies.

There are limits to the research on the reasons gay men use these technologies. Focus has been drawn on the psychological and public health dimensions to these apps with special attention given to sexual health and practices (Landovitz et al., 2012; Prestage et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2012). Research has illustrated too, using a sociological lens, how these 'technologies might have impacted social constructions and ideals, such as commitments to monogamy and long-term relationships' (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2017: 274). What is missing is the love story, despite its importance for many gay men. Mike reflected upon his own experience in relation to Tim's final days in *Holding the Man* (Conigrave, 1995):

*And he made a trip to Italy, and the last few pages was like him seeing his, his missing of John and his love is still undying. And he sees other people who look like him. And he will fall in love just to be kind of heartbroken again and knowing that this hole will never be filled. That was just, yeah, heartbreaking. And I remember I associated this kind of sense of love, this undying, unconditional, unconditional love, that passage, that feeling. And also that sense of reading it and feeling it in myself.*

As briefly explored earlier, the campaign for marriage equality in Australia was based upon an ethos of 'equal love.' There is here however a conundrum. On one hand, sex forms, for many, a significant part of their personal narrative. This is clearly demonstrated by the popularity of hookup apps. On the other however, love, romance and trust form a large part of the narratives explored in the main thesis. If the message of marriage equality in Australia is equal love, this conundrum needs to be considered in light of the different meanings 'marriage' itself may carry. It is now timely therefore to examine some of the implications for the relationships of gay men now that marriage equality legislation has passed in this country.

## **Love and the marriage-equality debate**

While writing about 'traditional marriage,' that is, marriage between a man and a woman, nonetheless, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim reveal insights into the process of finding oneself in a partner – or a sense of completeness. In this process, the individual seeks to learn more about themselves, 'searching for the history of our life; we want to reconcile ourselves with hurts and disappointments, plan our goals and share our hopes' (1995: 51). At the same time however, they claim that 'love is the opposite of instrumental and rational behaviour' (Grossi, 2012: 495) as it can be ended at any one person's behest. Romantic love therefore, as the basis of marriage, presents a tension. Marriage may however provide something that de facto status does not.

From the outset, it must be acknowledged that same-sex marriage does not have unqualified, universal support (Grossi, 2012: 488) among the gay and lesbian community. Even if it were possible to marshal a 'gay and lesbian community,' as a unitary concept, misgivings regarding marriage appear on both practical and normative grounds. Michael Warner (1999a), for example, challenges the 'picket fence' version of same-sex relationships, arguing that these relationships need not be inscribed by those narratives. Similarly, Kane Race analyses the role of mobile hook-up technology in mediating new arrangements for sex and intimacy in 'a time when marriage and monogamy are increasingly monopolising the public discourse of gay life' (Race, 2015: 496). Empirical work has suggested that while on one hand, gay men accept the binary of love and relationships, or love and sex, on the other, they may be 'frustrated by them' (Slavin, 2009: 93). The enmeshing of love and sex or sexual activity has long been problematic for queer theorists (Grossi, 2012: 498). At the same time however, participants in my study reject the familiar narrative that intimate relationships among gay men are predominantly about sexual activity. Data from the main thesis suggested that participants wanted more than to 'rummage around freely for the sake of getting off for 10 minutes' (Kelvin).

Kelvin may indeed be unconsciously surrendering to the public discourse to which Race (2015) refers. It may also be argued that Kelvin is referring to the experience of romantic love and its effects, wanting to share with someone a special, unique moment.

As Lauren Berlant describes this experience, 'love approximates a space to which people can return, becoming as different as they can be from themselves without being traumatically shattered; it is a scene of optimism of change, for transformational environment' (2000: 448). The main body of the thesis attempted to show how the participants understood themselves and the world around them through their own love stories. This type of process is, for Berlant (2000), elemental to understanding the significance of romantic love in scripts that do not conform to heterosexual ideals. She suggests that when 'queering' love, it is important not to teach 'that we are all alike, and compelled to repeat our likeness intelligibly, but by teaching some of what we have learned about love, under the surface, across the lines, around the scenes, informally' (2000: 448). This depiction of love, especially 'across the lines,' evinces a feeling of potential – that love itself can deliver freedoms in intimate relationships, 'existing outside of established institutions' (Grossi, 2012: 499).

My study found that gay men want to have romantic relationships (Worth, Reid, McMillan, 2002) despite the 'normalisation' which some theorists (Weeks, 1995; Yip, 1997) have suggested necessarily accompanies these relationships. Data from the main thesis illustrates that the participants sought to make sense of themselves and the world around them through their love stories. Romantic love, after all, 'may create the hell of mutual alienation [but] it also retains its primacy as an anti-alienating potential because it offers a way of expressing forms of pleasurable subjective transformation' (Johnson, 2005: 83). In this risky world, romantic love can be an anchor, and something to be striven for and worked at (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), in large part because it possesses the potential for personal transformation (Berlant, 2000; Johnson, 2005). Berlant celebrates the potential of love to provide freedoms and 'rejects it as a means of establishing rules and barriers' (Grossi, 2012: 499). Of course, romantic love has been the conveyor of freedoms, but also the source of a re-entrenchment of inequalities (Grossi, 2012). Giddens' (1991; 1992) emphasis however on the democratic and agentic dimensions of love is echoed in Berlant's (2000) identification of romantic love as a site of resistance to 'traditional social structures' (Grossi, 2012: 501).

Such resistance to traditional social structures, marriage for example, then becomes questionable if marriage is entwined with romantic love. This is one of the central

debates related to marriage equality. Unlike some other jurisdictions, where legalistic and security issues were emphasised in the push for marriage equality (Einarsdottir, 2013), in Australia, ideals of romantic love became the centrepiece of the campaign. If romantic love therefore forms the basis of marriage, then in this case, rather than providing resistance to traditional social structures, romantic love adds support to them. Indeed, theorists have variously described same-sex marriage as a 'cop out' (Baird and Rosenbaum, 1997: 11), yet another source of male domination (Saalfield, 1993) and an institution that may 'colonize gays and lesbians' (Green, 2013: 378), reproducing gender roles along heterosexual lines (Yep, Lovaas and Elia, 2003). It is little wonder then that Phillip might say the following:

*I quite like living on the fringe of society ... I don't need to have acceptance from other heterosexual couples although I have a normal relationship like them, so that's completely unimportant, as is the word marriage ... is unimportant to me, I don't place much value on that. For me it's really, I just want to have the same legal rights.*

At the time of interview, Phillip had been in an intimate relationship with the same man for around three years. At that time also, Phillip's de facto status did mean that he did technically have the same legal rights as any other Australian with regard to his intimate partnership – except the right to marry. There is no need to here chronicle the complex arrangements same-sex couples have had with the Australian state as it is done with great aplomb elsewhere (Bateman, 1992; Brennan et al., 2004; Grossi, 2012). The important point is that Phillip highlights that fact that marriage law itself had been discriminatory, not so much that he wanted to participate in the formal, state-recognised institution of marriage.

Marriage for gay couples has certainly smoothed the way in terms of the rights associated with being recognised by the state as a spouse. Rich and Matt, who were married in New South Wales before the Commonwealth legislation provided the protection of marriage equality, reflected upon this point of rights when thinking about what might happen to one of them if the other were to be gravely ill, or die. As Rich explains, Matt is not yet 'out' to his parents:

*And I s'pose experiencing that [death in the family] face-on ... I've always said to Matt I would never exclude his family to anything but I've also seen it first-hand where I could be excluded from going to the funeral. I could be excluded, you know, I could be taken to court to fight over property or whatever it might be. So for me it felt more comfortable for me having the power [of attorney] because, obviously, being with your partner for however long you'd been and sharing a life you wanna make those decisions hopefully with your family and your other loved ones but, if the circumstances don't allow you to do that, then you'd most be the one that knows what he would have wanted. So we've put that in place as a bit of a backup, security blanket. 'Cause you don't know how people are gonna react under those circumstances.*

For Rich, unlike Phillip, marriage was less about 'claiming citizenship rights' (Einarsdottir, 2013: 788) than it was about having the capacity to fulfil the wishes of his partner, which is surely one of the most important features of a romantically-loving relationship. At the time of interview, marriage equality was still somewhere on the horizon for Matt and Rich. This did not matter, at least for Matt and Rich. Matt says:

*Like we wanted to commit to each other so we didn't really care that it's not legal, to be totally honest. We knew that it was something special to us and we did what we wanted to do on that particular day.*

For Matt and Rich, their marriage symbolises something more than recognition by the state.

In the debates around marriage equality in Australia, recognition by the state of the union on legal grounds paled in comparison with the argument for the equal recognition of love. As previously discussed, the platform upon which marriage equality arguments rested was 'equal love,' (Grossi, 2012) in comparison with other jurisdictions in which security as citizens was emphasised (Einarsdottir, 2013). In a break from what Mary Bernstein and Nancy Naples (2010) identified as an Australian tendency to seek recognition of 'de facto' relationships, by 2017, momentum had so built, that the Commonwealth Government's hand was forced – a postal vote was held and the majority of respondents said it was time to legislate for marriage equality. It is perhaps

because many activists saw these 'de facto' arrangements as a 'second-class form of relationship recognition' (Bernstein and Naples, 2010: 132) that momentum peaked as it did in November 2017. More importantly though, marriage equality symbolised *for many* one more step in full and equal citizenship for gay men and women to be embraced in (large parts of) Australian society.

Full inclusion within a society however, the rights to which one is granted or denied, clearly may be influenced by sexuality (Evans 1993; Richardson 2000). Even in a society such as Australia's, in which sexuality does not at least ostensibly have an impact upon citizenship, marriage equality may *for some* provide another way of achieving 'legitimate status as full members of communities' (Bernstein and Naples, 2101: 133). Marriage may not be for everyone, but at least under this pluralist framework, the choice to marry is there, whether it be for symbolic or practical reasons, or both (Johnson, 2013). Further, if we think about same-sex marriage in this way, we can allay concerns that these marriages privilege traditionally heteronormatively-constructed relationships (Butler, 2002) and that they represent a site of governmentality (Brook, 2002). Rather, as Carol Johnson has so persuasively argued in the Australian context, this 'symbolic contestation' (Johnson, 2013: 243) can serve to undermine normalisation instead of reinforcing it (Johnson, 2103: 243). Finally, this contestation goes some way in calming anxiety about what constitutes 'normal' (Warner, 1999a) in an age when same-sex marriage and monogamy seem to be 'monopolising' stories about the lives of gay men (Race, 2015: 496).

Hook-up dating apps for gay men are in many respects emblematic of the individualisation characteristic of late modern Western society. People make conscious choices about whom they will meet, not only for sex, but for friendship, companionship and romantic love. Despite the misgivings of some of the respondents in this study, other research has revealed that these technologies may have an 'overflow' effect, facilitating new forms of satisfying intimacies. Romantic love may not always last in the way that it began. People change, intimacies thaw and dissolve and relationships may no longer deliver the rewards that they once did. These technologies may, as has been claimed, aid and hasten this process. I think however, that romantic love continues to be very important to many gay men – the participants in this study have demonstrated



this. Romantic love is important precisely because it resists rationality (in most instances!). It requires a complete opening of oneself to scrutiny from the other in an epoch when the integrity and security of the individual is of paramount importance. Marriage may be an expression of this love, but I argue that for some gay men, it is not the only one. Among queer theorists, a level of discomfort is often expressed with same-sex marriage – that it in fact replicates institutions against which the queer movement has protested for so long. They suggest that same-sex marriage may subvert the freedoms associated with hookup sex that originated with bath house culture, by overlaying this culture with a layer of obligation that negates hard fought battles for sexual liberation. At the same time however, marriage, for some gay men, may provide an even deeper connection to their lover, in addition to various protections from the state. My original thesis contended that the experience linking freedoms and personal fulfilment was romantic love. Outside of the context of institutional relationships, as Giddens (1991; 1992) has suggested, personal fulfilment is found in relationships where trust forms an enormous part, and this trust is both impelled by, and impels, intimacy. For many gay men, marriage may form part of this trust. This does not mean sexual monogamy necessarily, as Giddens (1991; 1992) has also suggested. Rather, the relationship exists on the basis of trust, and the rewards that are negotiated and delivered. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have argued, this love, trust and intimacy needs to be worked at, something which the participants in my original study were eager to do.

Data from the main body of the thesis was used to illustrate how the participants narrated experiences of romantic love amidst a culture that emphasises the importance of sex. Technological developments have changed the ways in which gay men meet for sex. However, as recent empirical data and scholarship show (Chan, 2018; Race, 2015), love continues to form an important part of gay men’s personal narratives in this age of digital sex, just as it did in the late twentieth century. Dating apps for gay men are in many respects emblematic of the individualisation characteristic of late modern Western society. People make conscious choices about whom they will meet for sex, but also for friendship, companionship and romantic love. These technologies may, as has been claimed, aid and hasten a process of liquid modernity, but as I have argued, even in this context, romantic love continues to be very important to many gay men. My

original thesis contended that the experience linking freedoms and personal fulfilment was romantic love. When viewed outside of the context of institutional relationships, as Giddens (1991; 1992) had suggested, love allowed trust in a context of sexual freedom. Similarly, as I have suggested above, love continues to play a key role in the personal narratives of gay men in a digital age. Love resists rationality (in most instances!) requiring a complete opening of oneself to scrutiny from the other, and creating trust in an epoch when the integrity and security of the individual is of paramount importance. Even at another end of the spectrum, where the recent shift towards marriage equality offers gay men another type of security, love continues to be important in their stories. Among queer theorists, a level of discomfort is often expressed with same-sex marriage – that it in fact replicates institutions against which the queer movement has protested for so long. They suggest that same-sex marriage may subvert the freedoms associated with hookup sex that originated with bath house culture by overlaying this culture with a layer of obligation that negates hard fought battles for sexual liberation.

Yet what is missing from this critique is love. Throughout this thesis, I have argued for its centrality in the personal narratives of gay men. This remains as relevant today in the age of digital sex apps and marriage equality as it did at the end of the millennium. For some gay men, marriage may provide an even deeper connection to their lover, as an expression of love. For others, love may be found in the connections they make through hookups. The main point is that the two are not mutually-exclusive – they can happily co-exist. Love stories retain tremendous importance in part because of, and narrated through, ‘a bit on the side.’



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