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The Confluence of Us

Creative-Relational (Love) Making of Gay Men's Identities

ABSTRACT This essay explores gay men's identities as processes of creative-relational construction of the self. I problematize the common sex-centered conception of being gay as "I am gay because I have sex with men." Bringing together Paul Ricœur's work on identity as autobiography, Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic as a constructive force, and Derek Greenfield's understanding of relational orientation, in the light of an interview with Manoel, a young gay man from Malta, creative-relational inquiry affords a richer notion of gayness as "I am gay when I am with you" and "I am gay because I love you." **KEYWORDS** Intimacy; Creative-relational inquiry; Love; Gay; Identity

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, I interviewed ten men as part of my PhD research; it was an effort to explore the personal stories and social discourses through which gay men have constructed their (our) sense of self.¹ The men who participated in this research were from different countries, had different professions, lived in various locations across the United Kingdom, and their ages spanned four decades. Manoel (pseudonym), the participant whose narrative this essay will feature, was a 30-year-old man at the time of the interview. He lived in London and was originally from Malta. I share his narrative here to illustrate how the individual engages in a "creative-relational"² process to produce an understanding of gay identity that reclaims intimacy and resists powerful sex-centered narratives.

Historically, defining relationships between men has been a question of medical, legal, religious, and social concern, and it has been in the hands of institutions. Gay men's relationships have been researched, medicalized, criminalized, debated, and treated as profane. Sometimes, they have been celebrated too. However, not much has been said about what these relationships mean to gay men themselves and how these meanings intertwine with who they are. Is it the right of gay people themselves to define what being gay means to them?

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Through the course of my research, it became apparent that when gay people conceptualize their identities, this act is limited to and by the framework that medical authorities, religious bodies, legal, and other social institutions have already defined as, and within the discourse of, “sexual orientation.” In this “regime of truth,”³ sexual desire and sexual practices are the core criteria of being gay, and therefore gayness is often reduced to these sexual aspects. In the context of the relentlessness and dominance of this sociocultural discourse, I view eliciting and developing personal narratives as a challenge, but also as an opportunity for gay men to describe in their own terms what being gay means to them.

A GAY MAN'S NARRATIVE—MANOEL IN HIS OWN WORDS⁴

When I moved to the United Kingdom, I moved for many reasons. Not gay-related, but one of them was . . . I wanted more freedom. My mum doesn't know I'm gay. She's in her 60s. My parents are in their 60s. She thinks of this idea: just find a girl and she'll take care of me. Which I think . . . Why should I . . . ? I can take care of myself. They just want grandkids; it's what they're expecting from me. Sometimes I think they need to know I'm gay. But at the moment I don't find it necessary. Because, what's the point? I'm still single. I only need to tell her when I'm seeing someone. Then, of course, I'll tell her, but at the moment I'm single and that's it. . . . Although in the end, I don't think I want to tell her because all this is going to trouble her. You know, I would tell her, but when I'm in a relationship. . . . But I'm single, so it's not a priority.

I had many sexual encounters in the past. Probably like many other gay men. But . . . I've reached a point in my life where—I'm not saying that I don't do one-night stands but—I [want] my own boyfriend and sex becomes something very intimate and personal; where you actually have a romantic relationship. Where sex is much better than when you have a one-night stand. And suddenly you have someone to belong to. And he belongs to you too. So, you complement each other in life and it makes life easier and better. Even despite being gay.

I've been looking for it in the past three years. And it didn't happen. Partly because I've been too picky: Looks . . . Education . . . Having the same interests . . . Now I'm less picky. I'm ready to give up some things. Compromise. There are always things you don't like about someone. . . . [I changed] when I started going to meet-ups, and truly meeting people in person. If he's a nice person to connect with, why does it need to be about looks? When you're in a relationship, you find those things less important. If there's something you don't like about the guy, you would work around it. In the

end, he's an influence on you and you're an influence on him. If there's something you don't like about him and if there are things he doesn't like about me, I'm sure we can change a little bit.

Last time I met someone, it lasted for two months. We really do like each other. The hard thing is that he's not ready for a relationship. I was disappointed because I do like him and . . . he seemed keen to remain friends. . . . We went to Ireland together. And I got to know him; we got to know each other, in more confidence. We teased each other, made jokes about each other without being offended, without being shy. I asked him if he wanted a relationship. It's a bit disappointing; I'm sure he likes me . . . but, I think there is something stopping him . . . from wanting more. I met him, like tonight, at a meet-up. He's English. Brown hair, blue eyes. I'm not particularly attracted to blue eyes, but you know, he's very good looking. I think what I like about this guy is—and this makes people laugh but—I like guys who look like idiots, but they're actually very intelligent in a way that makes them look a bit nerdy. And, he's very intelligent, I would say, but he never showed it. And he doesn't show it because, perhaps, the way he dresses; he doesn't care. He wore a T-shirt that, if I was in a relationship [with him], I would throw it away and buy him a new one. . . . And, that's another thing; perhaps some guys are so much into the way people dress. Whereas, I'm ready to find someone who doesn't look to my liking.

Anyway, that was in one of the first meet-ups and we were texting. "How are you?" And, gradually, I felt responsible for him. And then in August, in a gay walking group, when we were on a hike, I told him: "What are you up to on Sunday? I'm meeting with my ex-housemate for drinks to catch up. Feel free to join. . . . Unless you want to come tonight; I'm meeting with some friends and we are going down to Soho." And he went along, and it happened! We liked each other! Then, we were meeting twice a week, I was trying to meet more frequently, but he seemed reluctant to it. And by the end of October I wanted to commit further, I was ready to commit to a relationship, but he seemed confident to remain friends. . . . To some extent, I'm glad about it because he needs friends as well. Since then we're meeting regularly. But once in November, once in December, we ended up together. Again. But it didn't end that night. So, in Ireland, we did have a very deep thing together, but it just . . . You know, we slept as if nothing ever happened! And it was disappointing for me. You know, the attraction is there, but I want more. And sometimes I feel, if he doesn't want more, it wouldn't make me happy either. But yes, there's something restricting him from wanting more. And it's certainly not that he doesn't like me. The thing is, I don't want to . . . wait for him. I would still date someone else.

The problem is, some of the meet-ups I go [to], he's always around and when he's around we always end up talking to each other. It prevents the opportunity for me to meet someone else. . . . So, tonight I hope he [is] not there. It's not because I don't like him. It's because I want more.

I'm gay but I'm not particularly proud of being gay. I wish the gay scene were much easier to live in. If I'm honest—if I'm completely honest—I have times when I wish I was straight. Because I think—my perception at least—it's much easier to get in a relationship, and it's a more stable life and . . . I don't know. . . . Whereas being gay, we're obstructed by so many [things]. . . . Last week I was in Galway [with him]. I wish I could live in Galway—a small town which is picturesque—but I cannot live there because I'm gay and there are not many gay people there. I think gay people are restricted by where they could live, they always need to live where there are [other] gay people.

ON THE CREATIVE-RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF

Erotic and romantic relationships are a prominent topic among gay men. The reason for this seems obvious: the act of self-identifying as gay conjures another person. Paul Ricœur writes that the self becomes evident through the reflective act in which the person says “I am.”⁵ Because gay men have come into existence in dialogue, discourse, and representation mainly as sexual beings, the “I” is seen as an I that exists in relation to another, as in “I am gay because I have sex with men.” The reflective, self-defining act of saying “I'm gay” has been understood as a relational act that happens with, because of, and in relation to another man. Manoel's words suggest, however, a process of relating that would transform him and take him beyond himself, “into the other, into becoming-other.”⁶ While recognizing that there are various topics Manoel touched upon, one salient feature of his narrative is the importance that a romantic and long-term relationship has for him, even though—or because—he has not experienced one. Revealing his gayness to his parents comes as an internal debate that is foreseen to be resolved by the existence of a boyfriend who would make the coming out a priority. A partner would help his identity to unfold, but beyond the disclosure of his gayness to his family, the easier and better life he expects constitutes a beautiful promise that is more difficult to achieve as a single man. Thus, the imagined partner is not only a sexual partner, but also an agent who would catalyze the process of “becoming gay” through the process of relating beyond the broader social narratives that oppress gay people, opening more personal narratives that provide space to explore and create.

The abstract qualities of the term “identity” and the apparent simplicity of the term “gay” made participants in my study struggle to communicate what being gay meant to them. To the question “What does being gay mean to you?” Manoel responded: “I’m gay but I’m not particularly proud of being gay.” The question proved to be a difficult one because it demands a personal take on a collective narrative of gayness that has been defined through sex—a specific type of sex that brings with it discrimination, oppression, and punishment. For him to be proudly gay, he seeks to create a personal fiction⁷ that makes space for a relationship. Still, one of the aspects Manoel and other participants relied upon to articulate their ideas and bring the abstraction to concreteness was their special relationships with men they found significant. The specialness of those relationships cannot be pinned down to specific qualities, but, in many cases, those relationships eased their uncertainties, calmed their anxieties, and allowed them to iron out the making-sense processes associated with the often-distressing experiences they lived as gay men. These special relationships seemed to suggest that their togetherness created gayness; through the process of relating to each other, men were able to be gay, as if they were saying, “I’m gay when I’m with you.” In so doing, participants created new understandings of gayness through those special relationships.

In his theory of love, Robert J. Sternberg suggested that love has three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment.⁸ Intimacy is understood as feelings of connection between two people, feelings of closeness that are developed and maintained by both partners. On the other hand, passion or the erotic—grounded in an element of physical attraction and desire—facilitates the sexual connection between the couple and is seen as the motivation behind a loving relationship. Third, commitment involves a conscious decision to develop and maintain a relationship in the long term. My understanding of relationships is loose in the sense that I look at connections that can be centered on/driven by intimacy, eroticism, and commitment. I argue that the physical attraction that often leads to sexual encounters, the feelings of closeness that might lead to establish a relationship, and the commitment that motivates to maintain it, can be present in long-term relationships and also in those encounters that seem to be purely sexual, physical, ephemeral “one-offs.” I believe that those acts and the people who participate in those acts hold foundational qualities that we have incorporated into gay life stories, informing our sense of self.

When remembering Manoel, I think of a poem by Jaime Sabines, “I’m not dying of love: I’m dying of you, my love—dying of the love of you.”⁹ Sabines wrote this poem to an unnamed person who once was there, but

who is now absent. And their absence hurts. The author is dying, if only metaphorically “—dying of the love of you, of my dire need for my skin of you, of my soul and my mouth of you, of the miserable wretch I am without you.” Because of his deep yearning for someone to belong to and someone who, in return, belongs to him, in Manoel’s narrative I saw that notion of being there for each other, that reciprocity, that togetherness. I witnessed those feelings that inspired him to start a relationship and his willingness to make a commitment to maintain it. In his narrative, I can point to specific passages where that intimacy, passion, and commitment are in narrative action, but for each narrative display of love, I saw an obstacle to it. One of the main obstacles was the tension between the erotic and the romantic aspects of relationships, where the erotic is thought of as a euphemism for the sexual. Octavio Paz’s *La Llama Doble* (*The Double Flame*) on the relatedness of sex, eroticism, and love¹⁰ reminds me that I am speaking about a relatedness between the sexual and the erotic that, although it makes close, does not make them the same. For Paz, sex is the primal fire, the least human of these three forces, because sex is experienced by all nonhuman species; it does not emerge from culture but from nature. Eroticism, although emerging from the sexual, emancipates itself from the purely sexual and becomes a finer fire that feeds on delight, seduction, and desire that is not satisfied. The pursuit of love for life or the search for a love that lasts both the night and the day after, hints at a connection that transcends time. From “the three relatives,”¹¹ sex seems to be the most prominent element in popular representations of gay men¹² and the most accessible one. “You can have sex every day, if you’re not too picky,” one participant said.¹³ Although this broadly biologically-grounded argument about the reproductive function of sex seems irrelevant in sexual relationships between men, Paz’s work is applicable here as it highlights some of the implications of movements such as capitalism, which has made a product of the body and sex, a product that has been stripped of its affective qualities. The narrative that equates gayness to sexual encounters is ubiquitous in social discourse and limits a more sophisticated idea of the erotic.

If the erotic seems inaccessible in public discourses of gay men’s relationships, love is even more so. This conceptual closeness of love, eroticism, and sex makes me challenge the narrative that locates these entities as close to, yet separate from, one another. If we can be sexual, erotic, and loving beings, what stops us from being all of them simultaneously? In trying to solve the dilemma of love

and sex versus love or sex, I find an answer in Audre Lorde's uses of the erotic.¹⁴ In her feminist take on how the erotic has been misnamed, misrepresented, and misconstrued, the erotic for Lorde "is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing."¹⁵ Her work conceptualizes the erotic as a powerful, constructive, harmonic "lifeforce" that can be expressed. She invites us to reclaim in "our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives"¹⁶ because when the erotic integrates into our being, it allows us to live fulfilling lives. What would happen if, instead of fragmented narratives of love and sex in gay men's lives, we talked about one unified, harmonic *lifeforce*? A *lifeforce* of desire. Desire, as Jonathan Wyatt writes, "the push and pull, the draw, the force of the creative-relational; the force that connects, the force that leans us towards (the) other, towards becoming-other, towards movement, towards change. Desire is the creative-relational gesture that means we can't not go beyond ourselves, can't not spill out, can't not become caught up in the im/possibility of life's excess."¹⁷ The *lifeforce* of desire makes Manoel yearn for a boyfriend with whom he can have not just sex, but "sex becomes something very intimate and personal; where you actually have a romantic relationship." This notion resembles Derek Greenfield's, who proposed the term "relational orientation" instead of "sexual orientation" because the latter fails to describe individuals holistically by stripping them of their humanity, oversimplifying their subjectivities, and reducing them to a sexual aspect.¹⁸ A relational orientation is a theoretical shift that focuses on how connections between people are experienced rather than focusing on a sexual, behavioral component. Based on the ways that erotic and romantic relationships interweave with many other areas of life, I take this concept further and suggest that the emphasis on relational aspects not only is more appropriate and honoring of the ways in which gay men experience their relationships, but it is also necessary to understand gay lives with care and respect. Manoel's narration suggests that sexual encounters feel different when they are shared with someone he knows well and has feelings for. Physicality might be alluring and pleasing, but he sees beyond only bodies; he feels the hope of going beyond themselves.

However, as I write, I worry I am referring profusely to the topic of love, but Manoel never mentioned the word "love" in his interview. So why do I, in such a strong way, relate his story to a love story, when he did not mention the word at all? In trying to answer, I am aware that gayness has been constructed on the fiction that gayness is purely sexual. Benjamin Scuglia

writes, “Outside of a handful of independently produced films, and the occasional theatre piece, the only place to see gay men exploring their passion, their lust, is in gay porn. The only place our erotic history is recorded is in these erotic films and magazines, however humble their origins, and however craven their intentions.”¹⁹ The feelings I sensed while listening to Manoel’s words—his wish to belong to someone and share his very self—were of connectedness and intimacy, feelings of being for each other, reciprocity, togetherness, and resistance to the fiction that sex is all we—gay men—have; a reclaiming of the less accessible fiction that “when we were given sex, we also asked for love.”²⁰ Manoel’s description of what he wanted in a relationship seemed to be a proper fit for Sternberg’s theory, and even with this tentative idea of love, among all the men I interviewed for this research, Manoel gave me one of the most loving narratives: a candid and expressive account of the emotional scenario he was longing for. Perhaps the absence of a romantic partner made him even more aware of its importance. Arthur Aron and Elaine N. Aron propose that the self expands when two people engage in a relationship;²¹ by including aspects of each other in their realities, lovers enhance their selves; by uniting their lives, taking care of each other, and nurturing each other, their respective self becomes fuller and—as Skye Cleary puts it—their focus changes from “I” to “we.”²² The experiences Manoel described make me wonder what makes a relationship a love one. Does the other need to reciprocate those feelings for a story to be a love story? Is unrequited love still love? To me, listening about his trip to Ireland and how they both felt more confident and were able to smile together, to feel at ease—those anecdotes spoke about a level of intimacy that exudes loving qualities.

Later on, when the interview was finishing and Manoel said he was not proud of being gay, this showed the importance that a relationship has for him and made me wonder: If a relationship with that desired boyfriend would make life “easier and better,” would it help to create a more affirmative gay identity? Does a relationship hold the creative-relational power to bring pride to someone’s gay identity? Manoel struggles with his personal attempt to create a happier perspective in the midst of grand narratives that portray LGBTQ people in peril.²³ Anne M. Harris writes about the power and resilience of stories: “Stories prevail where bodies falter; stories remain when bodies are no longer.”²⁴ Manoel struggles when trying to create love, to make love from his relationships; the struggle comes from a social story in which gay men have been portrayed as lacking meaning besides the sexual. Through his quest for finding a boyfriend and making a commitment, Manoel’s narrative showed that even if his love

“dare not speak its name,”²⁵ it is love nonetheless. Loving the other, not only having sex with the other. A personal emancipation.

During our conversation, Manoel brought many characters to his story—some of them were gay men—and they populated his narration. One-night stands. Gay guys. People looking for sex and drugs. Boyfriends. Gay guys in London. Gay guys in Malta. Men on Grindr. Men on meet-ups. Older guys. Guys in secondary school. Guys on Plenty of Fish. And many generic “some-ones,” “hes,” and “they.” Nameless men whose identities remain obscure. “Not giving a name because names would add a history,” Andrew McMillan writes in “Jacob with the Angel,”²⁶ to put together physical contact between the bodies in the same place where individuals (seem to) remain emotionally untouched. A sense of anonymity that comes when we do not name people. Manoel did not mention the names of the guys he dated in Malta or London, nor the ones he tried to get to know online or via meet-ups. But, when he talked about “him,” about that Englishman, I interpreted it as a compelling act of including “him” in his narrated life with the dignity that an intimate relationship requires, by naming “him.” And he did. His name is the only name Manoel found worthwhile to spell out. His name brought him to existence more vividly, with a heavier weight, making him more important. Putting it into words gave him more realism.

I argue that the sense of being gay adjusts, strengthens, changes, and transforms because/when another gay guy mirrors our feelings, and by doing that, he corroborates our sense of self. I reflect on what Manoel said and suggest that if that person—that gay man—can give him—through his presence—the courage to confront difficulties, speak out loud, and restate “I am gay,” then maybe that gay man who reciprocates his desire can help him in the creation of his personal gay narrative. Thus, although gayness was created from the sexual relationships that have been everything and nothing, fulfilling and emptying; from those sexual encounters that first made us feel ashamed but then empowered us, this essay speaks to those men who, through those experiences of togetherness and fragmentation, made us realize that it was only with them, their presence, their absence, our desire, our questions, our rejections, and love, with their bodies, their stories, our fears, their inconspicuous families, our brokenness, our invisibility, our eagerness, and their presence, that we become the men we are. ■

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NOTES

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