Queering Edgework: An Autoethnographic Account of Cruising for Sex

Jacob Wesley Richardson

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QUEERING EDGEWORK: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF CRUISING FOR
SEX

By

Jacob W. Richardson

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

Drawing on evocative autoethnographic accounts of cruising for sex in public, this paper examines the cruising subculture within gay culture as a voluntary risk-taking leisure activity and thereby a form of edgework. Traditionally, edgework has been conceptualized along gendered lines, which associate risk with masculinized and feminized forms of risk-taking. Therefore, this paper also seeks to push the theoretical conceptualization of edgework beyond the gendered interpretations associated with the theory by using queer theory to re-examine the order/chaos binary along the heterosexual/homosexual edge of sexual identity. By queering edgework, cruising becomes a voluntary risk-taking leisure activity that both shatters and reifies sexual identity along this heterosexual/homosexual edge.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

I am in high school still and overhear some guys joking about a place where “fags” go to hook up. It takes me awhile to figure out where this place is, but I eventually learn that if I drive out into the oilfields at night, I will come to a bridge that goes across the Kern River. Apparently, I need to park on the side of the road where the bridge starts and make my way down the embankment to the river where all the hooking up goes on underneath the bridge. I pull in behind a white truck and turn off my headlights. I notice a handful of other vehicles and as I grow more nervous my heart rate starts to rise. As I sit in the dark, I can hear the drilling rigs screech and groan in the distance as they rhythmically move up and down in their search for oil buried deep beneath the earth. “Just do it,” I tell myself, “Don’t be a wimp.” I get out of the vehicle and move along the two vehicles parked ahead of me toward the start of the bridge.

There is no moon in the sky, which makes the night especially dark as I nervously fumble down the embankment. As I reach the bottom of the embankment, I am suddenly aware of the blackness enveloping me. It is in this moment that I notice an orange glow about 15 feet in front of me that seems to disappear as quickly as I notice it. As the glow reemerges, I realize it is the ember of a cigarette; a cigarette that someone was smoking, someone I cannot see. It spooks me so badly that I whip around and scurry up the embankment to the safety of my car. I am terrified, but I also feel exhilarated by the experience. As I start the car and pull away from this place, I know that I will be back.

***

When Humphreys (1970/2017) studied cruising in the 1960s, he put specific emphasis on “the payoff” (sexual gratification) as the primary motivation of guys who engage in public
anonymous sex with other men despite the numerous risks; however, my experiences as a white gay man from a middle-class background have led me to believe that cruising for sex can be rooted in more complex motivations that edgework theory may help us understand. In his work developing the theory of edgework, Lyng (1990) notes that the literature on risk-taking behavior, especially voluntary risk-taking leisure activities, is under-examined within sociology and limited within risk analysis studies. Specifically, he notes that the psychological model for analyzing risk-taking behavior primarily focuses on the potential rewards gained by risky behavior; however, this model struggles to explain that for many individuals it is the experience of taking the risk itself that generates more reward than whatever is achieved at the end of the activity (Lyng 1990). In recent decades, research around edgework has expanded to include feminist conceptions of edgework (Newmahr 2011), as well as resistance within abusive relationships (Rajah 2007). Furthermore, research on sexual edgework has focused on men engaging in chem-sex (Hickson 2018), as well as how buyers (Kong 2016) and sellers (Tsang 2018) of sex negotiate the edge in sex work; however, edgework has been limited to gendered conceptualizations, which is theoretically limiting in understanding sexual edgework specifically.

In this paper, I draw on my own experiences as a white gay man to construct an evocative autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis 2016) that weaves together Lyng and Newmahr’s gendered paradigms of edgework theory to show how cruising for sex can be considered a form of edgework. Furthermore, drawing on the work of queer theorists like Nameste (1996), Phelan (2001), Ahmed (2006, 2010), and Manalansa (2014, 2018), I also argue that cruising is an illicit leisure activity that disrupts/resists heteronormativity and places the cruiser’s identity at risk. This is because at its core, “Queer theory works to deconstruct or undo ‘compulsory
heterosexuality’ and homosexual prohibition and calls for the implementation of an ‘opening up’” (Stewart 2017:62). Therefore, cruisers transform everyday public spaces into spots of sexual ambiguity where heteronormativity and sexual identities are simultaneously deconstructed and reified along a hetero/homo edge. However, it is important to note that cruising is not an activity with a singular meaning or conceptualization. Cruising for sex can be and mean different things for the people that engage in the activity based on their positionality. Similarly, queer theory has a history of being used and conceptualized in numerous ways yet often falls into the trap of homogenizing queerness to privilege white LGBTQ+ narratives (Moussawi and Vidal-Ortiz 2020). By utilizing evocative autoethnography, I can demonstrate through evocative storytelling how cruising for sex was often a form of edgework for me, while respecting the diverseness of how people engage with and make sense of their own experiences cruising for sex.
CHAPTER 2
CRUISING AS EDGECWORK

“What are you doing when you get off,” Jessica asks as we wipe down tables.

“I think I’m going to cruise the park and see if I can get into some trouble,” I say.

“Can I come?”

“I guess, but you’re going to be a real cockblock,” I say with a laugh.

After we get off work, we jump into my car and make our way to a local park that is known for being a cruising spot.

“Why am I nervous?” Jessica asks as she picks at her fingernails.

“Cause it’s scary to cruise, especially at night,” I say with a smile.

“So why do you do it?”

“I don’t know. I guess the fear is part of the fun,” I say as she looks at me like I’m crazy, “Twisted, I know.”

As we approach our destination, I pull into a separate parking lot that’s just outside the park entrance.

“Wait, why are we parking all the way out here?”

“I don’t like to announce my presence. Parking out here means that I can kind of just creep in and if some trouble happens then my car isn’t trapped in the park’s parking lot,” I say. She looks nervous, so I say, “Listen, you’re fine. I do this all the time. If it feels dangerous, we’ll leave.”

We get out of the car and make our way up the hill that separates the park from the business parking lot where I parked my car. It’s dark out, but the park is relatively well lit. There are a handful of cars and a few larger pickup trucks in the parking lots. Most of them are backed in so they can have a view of the park and any action but also for an easy get away, and I can see

1 All names have been changed to protect people’s privacy and confidentiality.
figures in a few vehicles. We move through the shadows of the large trees making our way across the grass towards a few benches next to the riverbed.

“Okay, so that’s the bathrooms,” I point to a small building in the distance that is about 50 feet from a playground area, “A lot of guys will go in there to hook up but I call it the danger zone because it’s too easy to get busted by the cops in there.”

“Really?” Jessica says as she looks around, “This place is creepy as hell.”

There are some guys over by the playground that are being loud that I eye suspiciously.

“I don’t like that group over there.”

Jessica looks over to the playground nervously, “Why?”

“They are too young and too loud to be here cruising.”

“I think they’re looking over here,” Jessica says in a panicked voice.

“Yeah, we should get out of here. Just be cool,” I say as we turn around and make our way back to my car. The guys are a good distance away, so I am not too worried, but their presence is making me nervous, but I don’t show it.

“It’s just guys partying in the park, so don’t freak out, but I think that’s why nobody is at the cruisy areas of the park tonight,” I say as we start making our way up the hill to where my car is parked. “We could try another spot I know of,” I say.

“That’s gonna be a ‘no’ for me. This was more than enough excitement for one night. I can’t believe you do this regularly!”

“But wasn’t it fun?” I say with a laugh.

“No. I wouldn’t ever do this again,” she says as we get into my car to leave.

* * *
Lyng (1990) draws on a framework that utilizes Marx and Mead to connect the structural and the self in a synthesis that can help us understand leisurely voluntary risk through the relationship between constraint and spontaneity. Living in a post-industrial, advanced capitalist society means that much of our creative potential is constrained in ways that lead us to feel alienated from not just our work and each other but also from our sense of self. Lyng (1990:870) notes that how we engage with this search for a sense of self can often be driven by the various systems that alienate us, which pulls “… many people to the marketplace in search for self and encourages the development of a consumer-oriented narcissism that rules the lives of many who have the material means to purchase identity-relevant goods.”

However, people can also be driven into the direction of edgework that allows them to engage in voluntary risks during their leisure time that can counteract the oppressive economic and social structures that constrain our ability to self-actualize and feel a sense of determinism (Lyng 1990). In the above passage, I tell a friend that I am going cruising after I get off work because it is a way for me to shake off some of the alienation that manifests from engaging in the embodied performance of customer service as a waiter in a popular casual dining restaurant. As a gay man who at the time lived in a culturally conservative community without a cohesive LGBTQ+ community, cruising was an important subculture that allowed me to interact and connect, both socially and carnally, with other men. This dynamic contributes to cruising being a form of edgework because it is an illicit and illegal leisure activity I enjoyed engaging in during my free time and contributed to various forms of self-actualization, self-determination, and self-realization, all of which are sensations Lyng (1990) describes in edgework experiences.

Moreover, the urge to cruise is not limited to after-work leisure and is usually stimulated by a restlessness that I cannot shake. It is more than the physical arousal of horniness that I could
fulfill through a sex session with a fuck-buddy. It is a restlessness that can only be satiated through the unknown that comes from cruising, both risk and reward. In the above passage, the risk was clearly related to physical injury as the men in the park were easily capable of committing gay bashings on unsuspecting cruisers; however, as I will continue to demonstrate throughout this paper, this is a limited conceptualization of risk. Similarly, this limited conceptualizing also applies to how many outside the culture of cruising think about the rewards of cruising as being strictly sexual. Many straight people I know assume the sex is the reward, but the sex of cruising is often not very good; it is usually rushed, uncomfortable, and there is also the unpredictability of people’s hygiene that is another example of potential physical and psychological risk that most people would not consider.

* * *

I bend over slightly to play with his nipples as he continues sucking my dick. He gets up from his crouched position and walks four or five feet to the other side of the enclave where we are hiding. He lets his jogging shorts fall to his ankles as he bends forward and leans himself against a tree. I hesitate as he uses his left hand to pull open his ass to show me his hole, and my mind races back to the last time I fucked someone out here...

... Noticing the smell before looking down and seeing my condom wrapped dick coated in human feces.

... Heart racing panic and shaking hands as I clumsily attempt to remove the shit-covered condom stuck to my dick without getting any of it on my hands.

... “Him” calmly bending down to get a paper towel from his pocket and using it to remove the dirty condom from my penis and throwing it to the ground.
... “Him” fishing another paper towel from his pocket and using it to wipe his ass and tossing it next to the shitty condom I was wearing.

... Thinking, “HE DOESN’T EVEN SEEM FAZED THAT HE JUST SHIT ALL OVER MY DICK... I’D BE MORTIFIED... HE IS ACTING LIKE THIS IS COMMON... AM I IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE?”

... The condom did not completely shield me from his feces as he slid it off and left a brown streak that starts at the base of my penis.

... Wanting to scream and wash my dick with scalding hot water, but the park has no bathroom, so I calmly pull my pants up.

... Saying, “Have a good one,” as I turn to leave.

... Walking through the park with some urgency but not fast enough to look suspicious.

... Speeding home and jumping in the shower.

... Washing that dried brown shit streak off my penis.

These memories flash through my mind as I move toward this guy signaling me to fuck him. I place my hands on his hips to help stabilize myself as I squat down. He braces himself against the tree as I use my hands to spread his ass open exposing his hole more than he could with his single hand. He wiggles his ass in anticipation thinking that I am going to bury my face in it to eat him out, but I am simply looking. It seems clean but musty, which does not really tell me anything. I decide to trust my gut.

“Let’s just stick to oral this time,” I say as I pull myself up. There is a flash of disappointment on his face that quickly disappears as he turns around to face me.

“No worries,” he says as he grabs my now soft dick and starts kissing my neck. As he makes his way down to one of my nipples I can feel myself growing hard again.
While cruising for sex, many of the men I met did not openly identify as gay, which I found contributed to a lack of knowledge common within gay culture about the hygienic practice of douching before anal sex. This led to a handful of experiences in which men wanted me to “top” (anally penetrate) them in a park or public bathroom but ended with me having feces on my penis. A few of these experiences led to the development of a cruising anxiety that I humorously termed “anal anxiety” because whenever a guy signaled during an encounter that he wanted me to top him I immediately got so nervous about getting feces on my penis again that I would sometimes lose my erection. This firsthand experience led to the cultivation of knowledge about what sexual activities were considered safe or risky, as well as ways in which I could distinguish such risks in an ability to better control my cruising experiences in the future. This is an important observation because a crucial part of engaging with edgework involves cultivating the skills and expertise to exercise control over the situation/experience in a way that keeps the participant from going over the edge and losing control.

While attempting to expand edgework to incorporate a feminist perspective, Newmahr (2011) notes that edgework has traditionally been conceptualized through a value system built on hegemonic masculinities. Therefore, she argues that a feminist model of edgework must re-conceptualize the edge (order/chaos) and account for how less masculinized forms of risk-taking may require a different skill set than more masculinized forms of risk-taking. Cruising for sex benefits from a hybridization of Lyng’s (1990) original conceptualization of edgework with Newmahr’s (2011) feminist conception. It is an activity in which the risks of going over the edge into chaos are not just physical (rape/sexual assault, hate crimes/gay bashings, sexually transmitted infections, and arrested by law enforcement) but also social, emotional, and
psychological. Newmahr (2011:691) notes that feminized skills such as “… [T]rust, expressiveness, emotion management, perceptiveness, self-awareness, introspection, and self-restraint,” are all important and valid within the feminist model of edgework. In the above example, I had previously been plunged into a situation of physical chaos when I discovered human feces on my penis during a sexual encounter, but I simultaneously managed the social chaos of the situation as well as the emotional and psychological chaos in my mind.

Navigating the various boundaries between order/chaos while cruising is not always easily distinguishable, which contributes to a general “cruising anxiety” that is structured through interconnecting situational or relational anxieties that cruisers could potentially experience in the field (e.g. my own “anal anxiety”). In many ways, the story of my “anal anxiety” embodies the messiness of queer experiences (Manalasan 2014) in which queerness is associated with stigmatized activities, behaviors, and spoiled identities (Goffman 1963) while heteronormative norms/identities are associated with cleanliness (Manalasan 2018). Manalansan (2018:1288) argues that because queers and queerness cannot be easily separated from the normative, it creates a tension between the two in which they are “… constantly colliding, clashing, intersecting and reconstituting.” Moreover, since queer experiences are not monolithic, how we navigate the messy tension between queerness and heteronormativity varies based on our positionality.

This makes trial and error an important process in how cruisers develop the skills and knowledge necessary for them to manage risk (chaos). These trial and error skills are often specific to individual cruisers because they are developed in relation to subjective experiences. For example, my trials and errors with anal sex in public motivated me to cultivate the knowledge and skills necessary to avoid the displeasure of getting human feces on my penis in
an environment in which I could not easily clean myself afterwards. However, other skills are developed through knowledge cultivated within the larger cruising culture that requires interaction with others to be learned. This is because cruising, like any culture, is structured through behaviors and language that is constructed and learned and then put into and reified by way of practice (Tewksbury 1996).

* * *

“Watch out for that guy in the red shirt walking that way. We think he’s a cop,” Bobby says to me as I approach him and the two other men standing near him.

“Really? What makes you think that?” I ask curiously.

“He just looks like a cop,” one of the other guys says, “he looks out of place, too eager but trying to act all cool.”

“Plus, none of us have seen him around. That in and of itself is a little suspicious,” says the other man I don’t know.

Bobby says, “Maybe but the real test will be to see if he pulls out his dick first cause cops can’t make the first move. I can’t tell you how many guys think that if you ask if they’re a cop they gotta tell you, but that’s a fucking lie and how they get so many guys out here.”

“Really?” I say genuinely surprised, “But that’s what I always heard also.”

“No honey, that’s just what they want us to believe cause it’s how they catch us fucking up,” says one of the other guys.

“You can never be 100% sure, but you start to get a feel about what kind of guys to avoid,” Bobby says.

* * *
Early in my cruising activities, I generally believed what many men believe about law enforcement and entrapment; that if asked, law enforcement must reveal their identity (Tewksbury and Polley 2007). However, this is not true, and many men learn this truth the hard way or, if lucky like me, through interactions with men who know others who learned this truth the hard way. Bobby mentions that cultivating the skills to avoid encounters with law enforcement is not one-hundred percent reliable, but that it is something that seems to get better the more you cruise. Nevertheless, as a distinct subculture that we all are actively engaged in, many of us have a vested interest in maintaining that culture, which means that many of us look out for one another by making each other aware of things we find suspicious or dangerous. This dynamic helps cruisers build trust and allows them to further develop skills they can deploy independently when actively engaged in cruising in an attempt at keeping themselves safe and from going over the edge.

* * *

I pull into the parking lot of the park at just before 10pm. There are a handful of cars in the parking lot, but I notice two guys talking by an SUV toward the far end of the lot. I ease my car around the parking lot and park a few spaces away from the men leaning against the SUV. I eye them carefully. There is something about them that I do not like, but I cannot put my finger on what it is exactly. They look almost too clean cut, kind of like cops. However, they could also be straight guys looking to gay bash some queers, which make me nervous. During peak cruising times (early mornings, lunchtime, dusk) the environment crackles with nervous, excited energy, yet the night seems darker with an energy that is suspiciously flat, but I decide to get out of my car to smoke a cigarette and try to get a better feel from these guys. They eye me as I get out of
my car and light my cigarette. I act nonchalant and lean against the hood of my car as I smoke and pretend to not be bothered by them. I finally turn to them and say hi.

“Hey,” one of them says to me, “What are you up to tonight?”

“Just waiting for a friend to show up,” I lie, “What about you two?”

“You should go home,” the other one says to me.

I do not let it show, but this comment unnerves me. We continue looking at each other for a minute until I toss my cigarette and move to get back into my car.

“Have a good one guys,” I say as I climb into my car and start the engine.

In that moment, I know that my suspicions about them being cops is correct. As I pull away and make my way toward the parking lot exit I feel an overwhelming rush come over me. It is an exhilarating sense of relief, excitement, nerves, and danger. I would not have solicited them for a few reasons: First, I suspected they were cops. Second, I do not fuck in the parking lot (it is the easiest place to get busted by cops). Third, I almost never make the first move. I wait for someone else to solicit me first since cops do not grab or expose themselves when busting people. Nevertheless, having a brush with law enforcement at the park when they were clearly there to bust cruisers is definitely a rush.

* * *

Keeping oneself safe while cruising is not just purely physical. In fact, it is mostly emotional and psychological, requiring many of the skills that Newmahr (2011) identifies in her feminist model of edgework. “If ‘total chaos’ includes emotional chaos (e.g., overwhelming rage or fear, nervous breakdowns, or other instances of ‘freaking out’), then the source of the order is the control of one’s emotions and of one’s actions at the other boundary” (Newmahr 2011:690). In the above scenario, I pushed the edge by engaging with men that I suspected were undercover
police officers, which required a mastery over my emotions and nerves to maintain a sense of control over the situation as well as myself. Perceptiveness is a key skill when cruising. One must always be aware of oneself and the other people in their surroundings. For example, the suspected officer in the above interaction signaled to me that I was flirting with danger by telling me I should go home, yet it not only took my ability to understand the signal but also required me to maintain control over my fear and anxiety to not go over the edge. Similarly, cruising requires expressiveness and self-restraint to communicate non-verbally an interest in sex without allowing oneself be placed in a compromising situation that could lead to serious injury (physical, mental, emotional, social), which can often make cruising a long game. In fact, much of the time spent cruising is not having sex but playing a cat-and-mouse game of non-verbal communication with potential sex partners/gay bashers/law enforcement.

* * *

_I am chatting with Bobby in the parking lot when we notice a car pulling in and slowly circling the lot. I make eye contact when he passes us, and he pulls into a space a few yards from where we are talking. The man gets out of his car and casually looks around. We make eye contact again, and he starts to head into the wooded area of the park where guys like to hookup._

“That’s your cue,” Bobby laughingly says to me, “Have fun.”

_I take a different trail into the wooded area hoping I will simply run into him from another direction. I cut through an enclave of bushes where a number of men are standing around either eyeing each other or waiting for something they like to come along. There are a few nooks in this enclave that provide a minor amount of privacy for guys hooking up, and I can see one man peeking into a nook watching two guys giving each other blowjobs. I spot the guy from the parking lot on the other side of the enclave making his way further towards the river. He stops_
and looks over his shoulder at me before continuing in his original direction. This is my chance. The ground of this enclave is littered with used condoms and their wrappers as I make my way towards this guy. He is about 50 feet ahead of me, and he cuts a hard right along a section of bushes and trees and out of my sight. I instinctually feel the need to catch up, but I force myself to keep my distance and composure. As I round the corner I do not see him. “Fuck,” I say to myself, “you lost him.” I continue walking and notice an enclave up ahead and slow down. As I approach the opening I see the guy I thought I lost standing there with his dick out. He shakes it at me as he moves deeper into the enclave of bushes. I look around before following him. Neither of us say anything as I walk up to him, but I do not make the first move. I just stand there moving my eyes from his eyes to his dick that he is playing with in front of me. Finally, he grabs at my dick through my jeans and I allow myself to grab his back.

* * *

Cruising is about being in the moment. It is about both letting everything fall away in pursuit of a goal, yet being hyper-focused on one’s place within an environment and activity with a number of risks. Activities that qualify as edgework involve “clearly observable” threats to individual’s sense of order and safety (Lyng 1990:857). The most salient threats are often the physical threats to a cruisers sense of safety. In the above story, I have no idea who this man is that I am following. He could be an undercover police officer, or he could be a homophobic guy looking to gay bash me. A major risk of anonymous sex lies in the mystery surrounding the other person because sex is an activity that often puts people in a vulnerable state (physically, mentally, and emotionally). Am I following a porn star into this secluded area or Jeffrey Dahmer? Therefore, the development and deployment of skills is important in helping cruisers mitigate the potential risks to their safety.
The skills required for successful edgework often involve an individual’s ability to control situations that others would consider too uncontrollable, which is often developed through firsthand experiences (Lyng 1990). For example, in the above story, I purposely took a different route into the cruising area when pursuing someone in an attempt to control how we meet. This is a skill that I have found beneficial when cruising because approaching someone face-to-face allows me a little more control over the situation than simply chasing someone throughout the park. However, as evident from the above story, this does not always play out the way I want it to, which requires the ability to quickly reassess the situation before deciding how to move next. These are skills that are developed over time the more one cruises, which is why I scrambled back up that embankment to the safety of my car the first time I tried to cruise. I was a bumbling high school kid who lacked the skills and knowledge to feel confident in my ability to control the situation and keep myself safe.

Lastly, people who participate in edgework often note that, in pushing through their fears, they feel a sense “exhilaration and omnipotence” that helps produce a deeper sense of self-actualization (Lyng 1990:860). For Humphreys (1970/2017), the payoff of an orgasm was what he saw as being the motivation and reward of cruising. However, from an edgework perspective it is walking away from the situation unscathed that is the payoff. It is a sense of mastery and satisfaction that makes me feel more grounded and sure of myself as I walk back to my car. It is the voice in my head that tells me, “You got away with it,” which gives me a rush.

In expanding edgework to encompass the feminist perspective, Newmahr (2011) helps us understand voluntary risk-taking in less masculine ways. Cruising can be understood in both conceptions of edgework because the boundaries of order and chaos cannot be easily separated into either masculine or feminine conceptions. Cruising is both an independent and
interdependent activity in which participants gain knowledge and skills through engaging in both trial and error as well as through group dynamics that help the participant learn the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully cruise without going over the edge into harm. Therefore, cruising is at once a leisure activity with observable voluntary risks to one’s sense of order and safety that can be explained by these conceptions of edgework, yet they do not fully encompass the order/chaos dichotomy of cruising. If Lyng conceived of edgework to help explain voluntary risk-taking from a masculine perspective, and Newmahr helped expand edgework to encompass less masculinized forms of risk-taking, then queer theory can help us explore how cruising allows people to ride the edge of order and chaos that simultaneously shatters and reifies sexual identity along the edge between heteronormative sexuality/sexual typology (order) and non-heteronormative sexuality/sexual ambiguity (chaos) within a society defined by hegemonic heterosexuality.
“I’m no longer a gold star gay¹,” I say into the phone.

“What?” my best friend screams back at me, “who the hell did you have sex with?”

“I don’t know, some woman in the park,” I reply, “she was with some guy, and I was walking back to the parking lot with a guy I like to fuck when we ran into them, and it just happened.”

“What?” she screams again, “wait, does this make you bi now?”

“I don’t think so,” I say with a laugh.

“Did you like it?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t hate it,” I reply honestly.

“What does that mean?”

I take a deep breath, “Okay, you know how whenever we get brunch I always get the eggs benedict?”

“Yeah…” she responds.

“Imagine that instead of getting the eggs benedict I decide to get the chili verde omelet because it’s their special that day. It’s not bad. I don’t hate it or anything, but I probably wouldn’t get it again.”

My friend and I are both laughing.

“Again, what does that mean?” she asks.

“That it’s not my preference, but I now know that I can eat a little pussy appetizer if I know that dick is the main course,” I say with a laugh.

“Oh my God! EW!” she responds as we both fall into hysterical laughter.

* * *

¹ A gold star gay is a gay man who has never had sex with a woman.
Sexual typologies have been important because they establish order in our socially constructed realities. However, this order is based on a hegemonic heteronormative conception of sexual desire, behavior, and identity. This is why my friend asks me if I am bisexual in the above conversation. She is trying to make sense of what I am telling her about my sexual behavior, which does not align with my self-ascribed sexual identity as a gay man. Moreover, my unwillingness to neatly categorize my sexual behavior along these hegemonic lines of heteronormative sexuality leaves her in an place of chaotic ambiguity about both my sexual behavior and identity that is uncomfortable because it disrupts the sense of order that these typologies bring to how sexuality is constructed. Yet at the same time, this experience also works to reify my sexual identity as a gay man because while I openly acknowledge that I did not hate my interaction with the female form, it is not my preferred choice, which serves to reify my own understanding of my identity as a gay man who prefers to be intimate (sexually/romantically) with men.

Furthermore, this experience serves to reinforce my identity as a gay man in the cultural context as well because it is a reminder that my gayness comes not just from sexual behavior but also from the cultural construction of gayness as a social identity with its own set of norms, values, language, mannerisms, and more. Reflecting on my sexual behavior in this situation requires that I draw on the established cultural differences between straightness and gayness. To consider how my sexual behavior impacts my sexual identity means that I must draw on my understanding of these socially constructed sexual identities to either accept or reject these identities. While my sexual behavior may align with our social understanding of heterosexuality because I had sex with a woman, I have to process whether my sexual behavior actually means that I identify with straightness in the cultural context. That is, do I relate and identify with the
norms, values, language, etc. that convey a straight male identity? I do not. Therefore, my sexual behavior does not align with how society has come to understand gayness. This concept also applies to heterosexual identified men who enjoy cruising for sex with other men.

** * **

“Obviously, they are gay! If they fuck men then that means they are gay,” my ex-husband insists.

“That’s not true. I’ve had sex with women, but I’m not straight,” I say. “You’re conflating sexual behavior with sexual identity, and they are not the same thing.”

“They’re not?”

“Of course not,” I say. “The gay rights movement and gay rights advocates heavily pushed this narrative that being ‘gay’ is natural and that people are born gay.”

“Because they are!”

“Are they?” I reply. “I fully acknowledge that sexual desires are natural, but the idea that gayness as a social identity is natural is silly. This discourse that conflates sexual behaviors with sexual identity is a form of narrative resistance used to normalize and naturalize ‘homosexuality’ as well as ‘gayness’ for political and civil rights purposes. No one is born gay just as no one is born straight. These are socially constructed identities that we use to make sense of sexual behavior, which is why you feel this need to label these guys that hookup with other guys in the park as gay. It only serves to reinforce your own understanding of sexuality and sexual identity.”

** * **

Foucault (1978) makes this argument while working through his knowledge/power theory that links knowledge and power to discourse. Specifically, he writes,
There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexual… made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturality” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified (1978:101).

Queer theory draws heavily on these ideas about the links between discourse, power, and the production of knowledge by acknowledging that there is a paradox within sexuality discourse that makes it impossible to escape the interdependence of sexual identities (Namaste 1996). By accepting the identity of homosexual and utilizing the same dominate discourse about that identity to advocate for civil rights and de-stigmatization, sexual minorities legitimize not only the discourse itself but also the stock of knowledge that allows heterosexuality to maintain its dominance. Homosexuality is dependent on heterosexuality because “… to define a sexual identity outside the norm, one needs first to place oneself inside the dominant definitions of sexuality” (Namaste 1996:199). However, it is important to note how queer theory, in its attempts at disrupting or de-stabilizing heteronormative dominance, has also implicitly contributed to legitimizing or reinforcing other forms of normative dominance (e.g. race and class) (Moussawi and Vidal-Ortiz 2020).

For example, the experiences of Black men who have sex with men are often framed through the “down-low” narrative that draws on the intersections of race and sexuality to construct what Snorton (2014:16-17) refers to as a “glass closet” that constrains them while also making them hyper-visible. Down-low Black men who secretly engage in same-sex sexual
activity while maintaining heterosexual romantic relationships with women also reject traditional sexual taxonomies that work to label them as gay or bisexual, which creates a sexual ambiguity that is disruptive to hegemonic gender and sexuality structures. However, the biopolitical mechanism (Taylor 2014) of the medico-legal structures work to pathologize down-low Black men differently than white men because of the systemic racism embedded within these structures. As Snorton (2014:27) notes,

> The down-low figure often appears alongside other more ‘respectable’ figures… rendered responsible through their oppositional relationship to the down-low figure. […] being an out gay man is not a uniquely privileged identity but rather becomes a viable alternative to the trickery and treachery of men on the down-low.

Moreover, while many white men who cruise are often married and/or identify as heterosexual, it is Black men who engage in this same social phenomenon that have had an entire identity constructed around their behavior. Shane Phelan (2001) describes gay men and lesbians as sexual strangers because we do not neatly fit into either category of friend or enemy. Queers are from the dominant heteronormative culture yet not members of the dominant group, which makes us outsiders from within. It is our strangeness (ambiguity) that makes us threatening to these dominant cultures (Phelan 2001); therefore, gay rights advocates work to eliminate that strangeness through discourse and visibility that catered more towards appeasing heterosexual anxieties about homosexuality. However, the more visible queers become, and the more we advocate for civil rights through a discourse that seeks to both de-sexualize and naturalize homosexuality (Bersani 1995), the more we engage in self-erasure through assimilation into the heteronormative model of sexuality (Phelan 2001). Queer existence and legitimation becomes tied to the very power
structures that work to oppress us in the first place. This reality is compounded for LGBTQ+ people whose strangeness intersects with other dominant normative structures (e.g. race, class, ableism, etc.).

In assimilating into the heteronormative model, we shed our perverse (and unhealthy) sexual norms and behaviors for those of the dominate group; we stop being promiscuous, we embrace monogamy, we get married, we have children (not “naturally” though, which serves to continue reinforcing our unnaturalness), but culturally, we become straight. As queer people, these are the things we internalize and believe will not only make us happy but will allow us to demonstrate this happiness to those who believed our queerness hindered us from experiencing happiness (Ahmed 2010). Therefore, this promise of happiness is powerful in directing how queers navigate both their identities and the choices they make to legitimize that identity, which often serves to maintain the normative structure of power in society (Ahmed 2006).

Nevertheless, some sexual strangers will often seek refuge within “strangerhoods” where they can experience comradery away from performative assimilation, yet others outright reject this push towards assimilation thereby motivating them to experience a secondary marginalization from within their own community (Phelan 2001:32). Cruising acts as both strangerhood for sexual strangers seeking refuge from their performative assimilation as well as a site where others can actively reject the heteronormative values and hierarchies that assimilation promotes.

* * *

We make our way down the trail towards the parking lot and away from the secluded area by the river where we were just having sex. My nameless friend and I make small talk as we walk. He mentions his “old lady,” and I wonder what his wife is like as I admire his tanned skin and toned
physique. He is shorter than me (5’6”) and older as well (early to mid 40s), but he is attractive with a down-to-earth, blue-collar, “everyman” disposition that enhances his good looks.

“Hey, let’s cut into the main area and see if anything is going on,” he says as he veers towards the large enclave of overgrown trees where most guys like to cruise.

“Sure,” I say while admiring his insatiability considering that we just finished fucking minutes ago.

As we make our way down the trail and into the enclave, I am surprised to see a woman sucking a man’s dick. I recognize both of them as the couple who were sitting in their car when I pulled into the parking lot. My nameless friend is clearly excited and makes his way over to them where the man silently nods at him and the woman starts rubbing his crotch. He looks over and signals for me to join as he pulls his dick out and the woman kneels starting sucking his dick. My palms are suddenly sweating, and I have a swirling feeling in my stomach that most people call butterflies but is making me feel more like I am going to puke. I start walking over to them and feel my erection growing as the voice in my head screams at me, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

“I DON’T KNOW, BUT APPARENTLY IT’S HAPPENING,” I tell myself.

As I approach the woman stands up, and I notice that her breasts are hanging out of the gray cotton dress she is wearing. She smiles at me and says, “I saw you in the parking lot and was hoping I’d run into you out here.”

“Thanks,” is all I can say as she kneels down to start unbuttoning my jeans. My friend is smiling at me and playing with her breasts as she pulls my dick out and begins sucking me.

“She gives good head, huh?” my friend says as he bends over and lifts up the skirt of her dress to play with her vagina.
I notice two more men coming into the enclave and suddenly everything is happening so fast. One of the men starts sucking the woman’s husband(?), while the other man stands back watching the scene and rubbing his dick through his pants. The woman stops sucking my dick and follows my friend over to a log where he sits down and she begins sucking his dick. She pulls her skirt up exposing her vagina. My friend smiles at me before saying, “She wants you to fuck her.”

“Oh!”

I feel my stomach drop as I move closer to her. She’s rubbing her vagina as she sucks on my friend’s dick. I feel like I’m having an out of body experience as my hand reaches out and touches her vagina. I find it strange that I am a little grossed out while being so turned on. She takes my hand and uses it to rub her, and my finger slides inside her.

“What are you doing? You can’t do this; you’re gay!” my inner voice screams.

“Who cares?” I respond to myself.

She guides my dick to her vagina and rubs it along its length. I spit on it as she guides it inside of her slowly.

“Oh fuck,” she says as she looks back at me, “Go slow for a minute.”

Smiling, my friend asks, “How does it feel?”

“Good,” I say out loud, while simultaneously thinking to myself, “It doesn’t feel that much different from an ass.”

She moans as she continues sucking my friend’s dick.

“God, you give good head baby,” he says while playing with her breasts, and I start to fuck her harder.
My inner voice fades away as I fall into the moment. She lifts her head up from my friend’s dick and moans.

“That feel good baby?” my friend asks while he watches me fuck her and I watch him get his dick sucked. Despite the woman between us, the moment is charged with homoerotic energy as we watch each other.

After a few minutes, I can feel myself getting close and say, “I’m gonna cum soon.”

“Yeah, cum inside me,” she says and starts sucking my friend’s dick again.

I pull out before cumming and shoot my load on the ground, and a guy next to me says, “Fucking hot dude.”

I look around and notice a few more guys that are watching the scene and playing with each other. I step aside and start pulling my pants up while taking in the situation. The woman turns around and sits herself on my friend’s dick while another man approaches her with his dick out ready to be sucked.

“That was hot watching you fuck her,” the woman’s husband(?) says to me.

“Thanks,” I say. “It was fun.”

I move to make my way out of the enclave and look at my nameless friend fucking the woman. He looks at me with a smile and says, “I’ll see you next time.”

“Yeah,” I say with a wave, “See you next time.”

As I make my way to the parking lot where my car sits I think about what just happened.

I unlock my car and get inside to start it. I sit for a minute as the air conditioning blows in my face. I feel the need to tell someone about what I just did, but I know that most people won’t understand it or how it made me feel. I don’t know if I could describe it, but I feel weirdly calm and confident. I reach for my phone to make a call.
“Hey hoochie!” she says picking up after the third ring.

“I’m no longer a gold star gay.”

* * *

“We cannot assert ourselves to be entirely outside heterosexuality, nor entirely inside, because each of these terms achieves its meaning in relation to the other. What we can do, queer theory suggests, is negotiate these limits” (Namaste 1996:199). Cruising for sex can be a queered form of edgework because it is an illicit-illegal activity that allows participants to negotiate the limits between the safety of sexual typologies and heterosexist conceptions of healthy sexuality (order) and the existential danger of ambiguous and non-heteronormative sexual behaviors (chaos). It is at once a rejection of heteronormative norms and values regarding sexuality, while simultaneously working to reinforce those norms and values. Therefore, when I cruise for sex, I acknowledge the risks of participating in the illicit-illegal activity, yet to acknowledge the risks means that I am also reifying the heteronormative model of sexuality that produces the knowledge and discourse that what I am doing is deviant. The rewards are in the risks inherent to embodying the sexual strangeness that resists those oppressive heteronormative structures that pathologize my sexual behaviors as perverse/unhealthy. Taking these risks is simultaneously liberating and terrifying because of the potential psychological, social, sexual, and legal harm that I could experience if I am unsuccessful in navigating the various intersecting edges that exist between order and chaos. Nevertheless, I persist through my fears because pushing the boundaries of my own sexual identity/strangeness also leads to the very self-actualization and self-determinism that Lyng (1990) describes as intrinsic of edgework.

Cruising for sex allows people, especially LGBTQ+ people, to transform a normally heterosexual space into a queer space that allows cruisers to “… transgress boundaries such as
hetero/homo and man/woman in order to go beyond normativity and render space ‘fluid’” (Oswin 2008:92). When my nameless friend and I have sex in public we liberate ourselves from oppressive heteronormative conceptions of sexual identity and respectable sexual behavior (order) and ride the edge of sexual ambiguity and disreputable sexual behaviors (chaos) by transforming a non-sexual everyday space into a sexual space for exploring queered pleasure. However, I further push the boundaries of this edge by engaging in “bisexual” behavior with a woman, which is psychologically terrifying because it completely disrupts the established sexual typology I have internalized and embody in my day-to-day life.

Nevertheless, I allow myself to push through the fear to enjoy the experience, which simultaneously frees me to act outside of the boundaries of the hegemonic sexual order yet also reaffirms my feelings about my socio-sexual identity as a white gay man. People like my husband (an assimilationist homosexual) and my friend prefer the order that comes from the heteronormative typology of sexuality and do not like the chaos of sexual ambiguity. Not only are they unwilling to engage in this kind of queered sexual edgework themselves, but they also struggle to make sense of my involvement with such edgework because it threatens the taken for granted naturalness about sexual identities that provides them with a sense of order and comfort.

As Phelan (2001) notes, “Strangers threaten because of their ambiguity rather than simply their difference” (116). However, many cruisers develop skills that allow them to hold those identities loosely while putting themselves into environments they co-construct into spaces of non-heteronormative and ambiguous sexuality along the edge of the hetero/homosexual continuum because sometimes ultimate pleasures are found when we risk our sexual identities and wade into the chaos of sexual ambiguity that disrupts hegemonic heteronormativity.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Lyng (1990) broke new ground in how we understand voluntary risk-taking behavior, and Newmahr (2011) expanded upon edgework theory by helping us to better understand feminized forms of relational risk-taking. Moreover, Newmahr did this by re-conceptualizing the edge (order/chaos) as well as the types of skills and knowledge that people deploy in riding those edges. More recently, edgework theory has been used as a framework to examine various forms of sexual deviance, yet sexual edgework is still an under-developed area of edgework research. Much of the early research on cruising has focused on the culture and practice of cruising as a social phenomenon, while more current literature on cruising is often framed from a public health perspective that uses medicalized and pathologized discourses to explain cruising and deviant gay sex (Tewksbury and Polley 2007). In this paper, I have drawn on my own experiences cruising for sex to create an evocative autoethnography showing how cruising can be as a form of edgework based on Lyng and Newmahr’s conceptualizations of edgework. Using an evocative autoethnography technique engages the reader in an attempt to place them within the story and thereby evoke many of the same emotions that I felt while cruising for sex (Bochner and Ellis 2016). This makes evocative autoethnography a powerful technique in demonstrating how cruising for sex could be interpreted as a form of edgework.

However, the evocative autoethnography technique also allowed me to re-conceptualize edgework by situating my own experiences within a queer perspective that expands how we understand the order/chaos binary along queer lines rather than strictly gendered lines. This queered re-conceptualization of the order/chaos binary is represented through the heteronormative sexual typology (order) and a cruiser’s ability to undermine that typology.
(chaos). However, due to our inability to fully exist outside (or inside) this hegemonic heteronormative typology, cruising is a form of queered edgework that can help us “… think about the how of these boundaries – not merely the fact that they exist, but also how they are created, regulated, and contested” (Namaste 1996:199). In many ways, queering edgework can be seen as “messing up” edgework because “‘Queering’ and ‘messing up’ are activities and actions as much as ‘queer’ and ‘mess’ can be about states/status, positions, identities, and orientations.” (Manalansan 2014:97). This allows men who cruise to engage with each other in ways that mess up the order of the homo/hetero continuum that structure sexual identities despite the layers of numerous risks that threaten a cruiser physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.

It is important to note here that not all cruising is necessarily a form of edgework in either the traditional gendered conceptualizations or the queered conceptualization that I have attempted to outline in this paper. Moreover, I cannot speak to the differences between what the edge looks like for me as a white cis-gender gay man versus what the edge looks like for other men, especially men of color. Trying to do so would be inappropriate in this paper because it forces me to make assumptions about experiences I have not had as a white man. However, naming my positionality within this autoethnography is a necessary step in the process of decentering the silent whiteness that has implicitly dominated how queer theory is conceptualized and used (Moussawi and Vadal-Ortiz 2020). Nevertheless, what I can do is point to the potential that queering edgework could have in accounting for Black male experiences with sexual ambiguity and fluidity that moves away from the pathologized and racialized “down low” discourse that stigmatizes and vilifies Black men and their sexuality.
Writing this article could itself be seen as a form of edgework because there are risks in publishing work in which I describe my experiences engaging in an illicit and illegal activity. Could there be legal repercussions to admitting that I engaged in anonymous sex in public? This seems unlikely; however, as a graduate student at the beginning of his career in academia, the biggest risks of being open and vulnerable about my participation in this subculture is to my career. Publishing this article will probably spoil my identity (Goffman 1963) among certain groups of academics. In fact, sexuality research is known as “dirty work” because of the stigma that researchers experience (Irvine 2014). However, this article goes beyond typical sex research because it is an autoethnography, which is itself a methodology seen by some as not a serious and objective form of research (Rambo et al. 2019). It is a form of research that not only leaves me vulnerable to criticism about the methodology of this article but also to criticism and speculation about my personal life and sexual behaviors.

My mentor has been preparing me for this possibility throughout our time working together. In her feedback after reading the first draft of this article she wrote,

Because you are free, you can go to these kinds of spaces with ease. It is a gift. But your freedom does not protect you from the fuddy-duddies. They will burn you at the stake. I am asking you; can you take the heat? … I don’t want you hurt or surprised if you get some strong reactions to this. In my world, this is just what you do, research what you know, and you will kick ass and educate everyone in more ways than one. For others, you will be unclean. Take it from me. The fear runs deep. There is nothing to be afraid of, but that is irrelevant.

She has written about how her work has spoiled her identity, and the impact this had on her career (Rambo 2016), including how an Institutional Review Board (IRB) blocked her from
publishing an article that was already accepted to the journal *Deviant Behavior* (Rambo 2007). Things may be changing, but change is slow, and she knows what putting this out into the world could mean for my future career opportunities because she has been down that road herself. However, her concern for me never came off as discouraging, and our conversations continue to motivate me to forge my own path despite the risks to my career because I value authenticity. Ultimately, my goal in writing this evocative autoethnography is to give us a starting point to further expand and re-conceptualize how we study and theorize sexual risk-taking.
Works Cited


APPENDIX A:

RESEARCH NOT REQUIRING IRB REVIEW

The master's thesis committee for Jacob Richardson accepts the following IRB Regulatory Definition of Research that Does Not Require IRB review and concludes that this is not research that requires IRB review.

"(1) Scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information, that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected."

(https://www.memphis.edu/research/researchers/compliance/irb/decision_guide.php)

Carol Rambo

Gretchen Peterson

Wesley James