

# Go Ugly Early: Fragmented Narrative and Bricolage as Interpretive Method

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*This article presents findings from an ethnographic research project as well as a study of method that explores the meaning of the popular phrase Go Ugly Early as it is claimed and lived out by a group of males in a popular bar. Acknowledging that similar methods can accomplish some of the same results and effects, this piece is an example of writing as inquiry, layered account, impressionist/mixed genre tale, or hypertext. Through form and content, the author illustrates the political value of fragmented narrative as it disrupts the linear flow of argument, reveals disparate and disjunctive influences on the researcher's process of sense making through the course of a study, and opens more spaces for multiplicity. Through fragmented segments of scholarly, fictional, research journal, and participant narratives, the article explores how these sources of information play and interweave in the interpretive sense-making process and the construction of a research report.*

**Keywords:** *interpretive ethnography; narrative; culture; qualitative postmodern pastiche*

We must come to form in order to be in touch and so we speak. Our stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can. (Grumet, 1991, p. 69)

The expression *Go Ugly Early* is written in large letters on the backs of sweatshirts advertising a long-standing and much-loved college bar (called Jake's in this study) in a medium-sized U.S. city. This logo is popular among college students, professors, administrators, alumni, local high school students, and young children. Proud owners of this sweatshirt brag that they can be identified worldwide as members of this college community because of this logo. As much as any officially sanctioned institutional logo, the unofficial *Go Ugly Early* identifies the wearer as a member of this particular community.

Although many don the sweatshirt, few reflect carefully on what the phrase might mean, which might seem odd to outsiders, as the meaning of this phrase is an obvious curiosity. To some members of the college town, it simply represents the bar it advertises. For others, *Go Ugly Early* means much more. In the midst of an ethnographic project to study the way this phrase lived in cultural context, I met a college-aged male who assured me that he and his friends “really know what it means.” I took him up on his offer to show me how the phrase *Go Ugly Early* lived.

Indeed, this group of men both gave life to the expression and aided me in my search to see how it functioned in the larger university culture. The phrase began to take shape as an underground theme, even a mission statement for a particular subculture of college life: Men who idealize the image of the stereotypical American male whose primary goal in life is to have sex with as many women as possible, using whatever means available. Irrespective of whether the members of this subculture actually behave in ways that would put them in this stereotypical category, their homage to this penultimate male figure illustrates and perpetuates a disturbing tolerance of acts that violate and demean women.

This article presents an ethnographically informed expression of culture along with a study of method. The case study describes in rich detail the lived experience of a group of men deliberately invoking the phrase *Go Ugly Early*. The findings are evocative and disturbing, illuminated here in fragments of data, interpretive analysis of discourse, excerpts from research journals, and the structure of the research report itself.

At the same time, this article explores the idea of fragmented narrative as a method of analysis in interpretive inquiry. Although the narrative of the ethnography is presented in somewhat linear fashion, it is interspersed with ideas presented in other genres. The juxtaposition of these elements is, to a degree, highlighted by reflections on the epistemological premises and potential consequences of fragmented narrative and knowledge. The goal is to illustrate—by virtue of doing it here—two ideas about method: First, fragmented narrative, pastiche, or bricolage can function politically to encourage multiple perspectives, yet the interpretations are not unlimited, as the author still structures the experience of reading. Second, the arrangement and rearrangement of disparate but related threads of information can be an essential process of analysis.

This method of inquiry is not new. The premises undergirding my particular approach derive from Derrida-inspired notions of juxtaposition as deconstruction; Richardson’s (1995) call for attention to writing as a form of inquiry; Rambo-Ronai’s (1995) method of layering narrative accounts; Joyce’s (1998) contention that the computer-mediated age is teaching (reminding) us that we have always made sense in fragmented, hypertext forms; and Tyler’s (1986) compelling argument that postmodern ethnographic writing does not

seek to present a linear set of arguments about culture but rather, seeks to evoke.

It is vital to call attention to fragmentation or hypertext logic in methodology and writing, even as these types of accounts become more and more familiar in our journals. Individual sense-making processes, dyadic and group relationships, and that which we call "knowledge" are increasingly composed of nonlinear sound bites, transient connections, truncated texts, hyperlinked cognitive processing, multimediated understandings of what is real and meaningful, and so forth. Our taken-for-granted methods of collecting and analyzing data in these environments and representing culture in our scholarly work can only benefit from interrogation and reconsideration of how we derive and constitute the picture of social life we present to our colleagues and public. Attention to the way fragmented discourse functions helps us not only understand how people are experiencing everyday life but also, as scholars, explore new ways of making sense of social life and expressing knowledge.

Although much theoretical interest in nonlinear construction and presentation of scientific knowledge exists, few academic journals seriously consider alternatives to the traditional form of scholarly report. A few journals experimented with hypertext in the mid-1990s (e.g., *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*) but for many reasons, shifted back to a traditional format after a short period of experimentation. Creating hypertext is labor intensive, with little payoff, particularly if combined with the fact that potential readers may not yet be comfortable with disjunctive presentations of research (J. December, editor of *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*, personal communication, October 2003). Even so, the theories behind hypertext can help to highlight some of the ways traditional academic discourse may actually misrepresent the sense-making processes it seeks to describe and explain.

None of this is unfamiliar to readers in interpretive sociology. My point is to offer a rich example of some of the ways disjuncture, fragmentation, and juxtaposition influence sense making for the researcher as well as the reader, with significant impact on the meaning of the object and outcome of study. The impact is not insignificant, politically speaking. The fragmented narrative can function as political action in many ways: It can resist traditional academic systems, which may acknowledge alternate ways of knowing but nonetheless continue to lock sociological inquiry into normative forms that serve to reify the traditional system itself. It can also open the space for reflexivity for both the author and the reader. A researcher's choices throughout the research process matter, in that they lead to interpretations and subsequent forms of presentation that have persuasive effects. Revealing even a few of the author's choices in the production of social knowledge can open a space for critical and reflexive authorship and reading. Juxtaposition and fragmentation help authors see—through disjuncture—their own habits of interpreta-

tion, to reveal, or at least question, taken-for-granted patterns of sense making. Fragments also tend to reveal and, therefore, make available the interstices of reading, so that the reader is not locked into a single line of argument, the form of which is transparent in its smooth familiarity. Multiplicity is made more possible.

One must understand that the goals of research may be distinctively different than in traditional research. In fragmented narratives, power is more distributed: The piece can simultaneously make the author's particular set of arguments and allow for alternatives by revealing the practices at work in the interpretive process. In the end, something important about the topic is learned, but the outcome is not completed, controlled, or predicted by the form.

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Reasoning need not be bound to argumentative prose or be expressed in clear-cut inferential or implicative structures: Reasoning may be discovered in all sorts of symbolic action—nondiscursive as well as discursive. (Fisher 1984, p. 1)

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Lauren gazed at the bottles of alcohol lined up against the mirrored wall behind the bar, thinking of her choices and half listening to her friend Jill, who was talking about three graffiti-framed fraternity guys sitting at a table behind them. Their reflections were obstructed by the bottles, but she thought she could distinguish their boisterous voices in the escalating cacophony of the evening. She wondered what she should drink—beer would be cheaper, but a Long Island would numb her nerves more quickly. Self-consciously, Lauren pulled in her stomach and straightened her shoulders. Where should they sit? Not too far from the main flow of people and action, but surely not here at the bar—too close to the door . . . and too visible.

"What are you going to drink?" she asked without turning her head. "Do you want to get a Long Island?"

Jill was still trying to figure out who the new arrivals were: "I think I had a class with one of them. Was it Supervision 234?"

"Mmmm, don't know," Lauren murmured, trying to catch a glimpse of them without actually turning around. She could tell they were looking at her and Jill and she didn't want to encourage them with direct eye contact. She always knew when a group of guys were checking her out. It was *The Gaze*, something a woman could feel on the back of her neck. She sighed, wondering what she was doing here. She wanted to roll her eyes at the entire scene, but she knew she looked silly when she did that. Definitely, looking silly was not something she would ever consider here.

"Lauren," her friend said pointedly, interrupting her reverie. "Drink. Decide. Then let's go stake out a spot."

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The front of the sweatshirt (and T-shirt and ball cap) in question advertises the popular bar Jake's with a small logo, but the more obvious element of the shirt is the huge pronouncement on the back: "Go Ugly Early." A significant symbol of undergraduate culture at this university, the logo is sported in various styles and colors by men and women, parents and children, alumni and athletes. Around the country, people can find a connection to their alma mater through the words *Go Ugly Early*. I had never heard the phrase before coming to this university, and it struck me as odd—not only because the meaning was vague but also because so many people displayed it on their backs.

What does *Go Ugly Early* really mean? This question plagued me for a couple of years and now it haunts me whenever I see the expression or walk into a bar. But I am getting ahead of the present story. Is there only one meaning? When I asked people what the phrase meant, the answers were as varied as the individuals wearing the shirt.

Really, there is no possibility of uncovering the definitive meaning of the phrase. Still, a deep current runs steadily under the surface appearance of this phrase, both as it is laid out on people's backs and as it is uttered by those who claim to know its true meaning. Put differently, the phrase may be identifiable as an obvious artifact of this university culture, but under this obvious facade, meaning in context functions to perpetuate and glorify certain ugly attitudes and behaviors. Like the floors of the bar it advertises, which hide the rooms used during prohibition, the ubiquitous and almost symbolically invisible appearance of *Go Ugly Early* seems to allow socially prohibited enactments of this phrase to remain unremarkable and acceptable.

I have had a particular conceptualization of *Go Ugly Early* since early in the study, and this definition has not altered as this ethnography has progressed. Certainly, my definition has become more refined as people I interviewed contributed the details of their own lived experience as these intersect with the phrase. This outcome may be that I see the world only from my own perspective, which is an admittedly narrow set of possibilities. Or maybe I am right, and *Go Ugly Early* really means what I always thought it meant. In a way, the truth of the matter is not nearly as meaningful as the telling of the phenomenon itself. By reading this, we gain insight about one side of college life in the late 20th century, or one side of humanity in any century.

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Stacy [*a colleague and interviewee*]: *Go Ugly Early* means since it's inevitable that a guy's gonna get drunk and make a poor judgment about who to take home to fuck, he might as well get drunk quickly and choose the ugly girl early—make that poor judgment sooner rather than later. . . . It's indicative of a kind of general lack of respect for a woman's personhood. It seems to me to be sign-evidence of a tendency to take women as nothing more than sexual

objects, whose sexuality is defined in terms of fairly constrained notions of attractiveness. . . . I think it says to men, "Fuck anything you can . . . any hole is a good hole," that's what I think this message says. Ideally, you would not want to fuck something that you don't want to face in the morning, but, you know, if you have to. . . .

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No! No! Sentence first—verdict afterwards. (Carroll, 1941)

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Fine with me.  
But I could be wrong.  
Not likely.

An online search for the term *Go Ugly Early* yields hundreds of interesting links and an interesting set of verdicts. To be fair, there is a legitimate kickball team in Minneapolis, Minnesota, called Go Ugly Early. Many links, however, lead to the following set of guidelines for how to get a girl (too many instances to warrant citation):

*GO UGLY EARLY*

An excellent and very simple technique tried and tested on many of my friends. The technique, for all men who are desperate for a shag, is to chat up the ugly birds early in the evening when you are sober and stick with them. Unlike the more usual technique, of chatting up the pretty ones when you are sober and only moving on to the ugly ones later in the evening, GUE has a close to 100% success rate. The technique has 10 key advantages:

1. (Out of necessity) you get pissed quicker.
2. They are immensely flattered as they have never been chatted up before by a sober person with teeth, hair and/or money and without spots and a weight problem—(if you suffer from some or all of these afflictions, they won't mind too much anyway).
3. By the time you get incoherently pissed they will laugh and not sneer at your jokes—they will also ensure you get them to a bed safely as they are even more desperate than you are.
4. By the end of the evening, they look just as gorgeous when you go home with them as they would if you had tried and failed to pull them later in the evening after chatting up prettier women first.
5. You have time to get them pissed enough for guaranteed action. Out of a combination of gratitude and compensation for their appearance they will do things in bed (or the bar/night-club/street/taxi) that many pretty women would never dream of (except with an A-list Hollywood star or billionaire).
6. No solution, apart from 8 pints at lunchtime, has been found for the coyote effect in the morning but a shag's a shag, and you will never know what fun can be had with different body shapes unless you try.

7. In the morning always ask for their phone numbers. Because no one has ever asked for them before they will eagerly give you their home, work and mobile phone numbers. If you promise to call them they will be so overexcited, they will usually forget to ask you for your numbers and you thus avoid having to ever contact or see them again.
8. With the passage of time, you will always remember them as much better looking than they were.
9. Practice makes perfect and after a stream of successes with the ugly birds your confidence and pulling skills will have increased sufficiently to move on to their better looking cousins. You will have more success than pre-GUE as all men get the same proud “just shagged look” from shagging ugly birds as pretty ones. Pretty women will only be able to tell that you are in demand and throw themselves at your feet.
10. All ugly girls have pretty friends who despise them and love stealing their boyfriends.

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Should I wait to sentence this or just get right to the point? Is this target too easy? (Actually, appearing here, at this juncture in this research report, the subject is already sentenced.)

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Phil: Hey, Joe, check out the fat chick. Man, that thing looks like a movie projector screen!

Joe: Who? That one standing at the bar?

Phil: Yeah, that big-un. See that jacket wrapped around her waist? And she's wearing those big ol' baggy pants—she's wearing them cuz she's got a fat ass. Wait till you see that fat ass!

Joe: Yeah. Whoa doggy! Check out that profile. That jacket—you know she's hiding a big ol' butt under that jacket.

Phil: Yeah, dog, but a few more beers and she'll be lookin' good to you.

[laughter]

Joe: Remember when we hooked Greg up with that chick that weighed at least 250 pounds, and she was six foot, maybe. She was big.

Phil: That was funny as hell! I still give him shit about that—“Hey Greg, you scored a fat chick!” and he's all defensive, like, saying, “What are you talking about?” He's always saying I was jerking her around, that my eyesight was off. But we didn't have the beer goggles on yet. We were sober enough to see that wide load!

Joe: Yeah, he's got to be regretting that move. He'll get fat jokes for years about that one.

Phil: Well, you can have the one with the jacket. I'll take her friend. Check out those hooters! Out to here!

Joe: You don't have a chance in hell, Phil. I've seen her around and she's always flirting and showing off her big tits for the guys. Gets them drooling and then blows them off. That shit's too hard to get. Don't waste your time.

Phil: Yeah, but she hasn't met the power of my sword yet. A little “UH! UH!” on the dance floor and she's all mine. I could fuck that.

Joe: You're such a dumbshit, Phil. I'm telling you, don't waste your time. Who's buying the next pitcher?

Phil: I'll get it, want anything else?

[These statements are taken directly from transcribed conversations among seven males at Bar X, audio recorded by me. All names are pseudonyms.]

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In *The Call of Stories*, Robert Coles (1989) recalled a moment when his friend and adviser told him, "Remember, what you are hearing is to some considerable extent a function of *you*, hearing" (p. 15). Coles also noted that "as active listeners we give shape to what we hear, make over their stories into something of our own" (p. 19).

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### *Research Journal, October*

Friday night. I was sitting on the couch wondering if I could muster up the energy to go back to the office to work. So, a few minutes ago, I asked my roommate if she had any books or articles on postmodernism or fiction or interpretive ethnography. I figured I could justify staying on the couch if I read something that made me feel as though I were actually accomplishing something useful. I started looking at some of Heather's books while she looked through her files.

"Anything will do," I said.

I could hear her murmuring, "Foucault. . . . Burrell. . . . Here's one but it doesn't really talk about postmodernism or fiction. It just does it. It's Pacanowsky."

"Well, maybe I'll read it anyway. Is it something about cops?"

"No. *Slouching Toward Chicago*."

She left. I started reading the article, wondering how long I could hold out before I got distracted enough to turn on the television. Imagine my surprise when I realized that the article was appropriate *and* meaningful! Go figure! How odd that the only option for reading in my own house is something completely applicable. I guess the project must be fated to happen, so I'll keep working.

From Pacanowsky (1988), here's a thought: "Fictional descriptions, by the very nature of their implicitness and impressionism, can fully capture (can I be so strong?) both the bold outlines and the crucial nuances of cultural ethos" (p. 454). Stories are "aesthetic experiences which help [people] to interpret their own lives and to relate them to the nation, town, or class to which they belong" (Pacanowsky, 1988, pp. 465-466). In short, stories encourage us to read between the lines. When we read, our experiences might resonate with



certain passages, so we'll read the passages over and over, reveling in every moment of the reading. With other events or characters, we might have no connection; we might skim.

I should remember to include a comment Pacanowsky (1988) made when he read a book by Susan Krieger (1983). He pondered the fact that Krieger used a Studs Turkelesque form to make sense of her experience and then included a "normalizing essay" in the appendix justifying fiction as a scholarly genre. Pacanowsky asked, "How many pages of scholarly index do you need to get away with how many pages of fiction?" (p. **PLS PROVIDE PAGE#**). Cool question, to which I, in my somewhat rebellious state, might respond: None, or thousands, depending on who's on top these days, who you want your audience to be. Fiction works for me, I might add, and I'm writing in the margins as a result. And as I figure it, what's the point of being here in the fringe if I can't do what feels right? To which Pacanowsky might respond—and does, if I turn my reading of his text into an imaginary dialogue between the two of us,

Who cares if the fiction I write doesn't make it into the American Lit syllabi of the 21st Century? . . . The issue isn't one of producing the world's finest writing; the issue is *what does fiction allow that normal scholarship does not?* (pp. 460-461, italics added)

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Problematizing the distinctions between fact and fiction is a current and recurring—if not common—theme of writers writing on writing (or other less privileged forms of research representation such as performance or artistic expression; e.g., Ashmore, 1989; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Coles, 1989; van Manen, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995; as well as numerous literary critics). Many contemporary writers not only question the principles and premises of ethnographic realism (e.g., Tyler, 1986) but also reject strict adherence to "realism" in their own ethnographic texts (e.g., Burawoy, Burton, Ferguson, & Fox, 1991; Freeman, 1992; Wolf, 1992).

Regardless of form, the presentation of ethnographic interpretation is a (re)visionary and fragmentary result of much picking and choosing and shaping and editing. For Tyler (1986), postmodern ethnography consists of "fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect" (p. 125). Evocation is the goal. In its aesthetic form, ethnography moves back to experience:

It aims not to foster the growth of knowledge but to restructure experience; not to understand objective reality, for that is already established by common sense, nor to explain how we understand, for that is impossible, but to reassimilate, to

reintegrate the self in society and to restructure the conduct of everyday life. (Tyler, 1986, p. 135)

The therapy to which Tyler (1986) referred is aesthetic integration. So in our everyday lives, we are addressed by and experience "the aesthetic" (such as poetry or art or postmodern ethnography), which "departs from the commonsense world." But it does so only to reconfirm our understanding of the world and to return us, "renewed and mindful of our renewal" (Tyler, 1986, p. 134). For Marcus (1986), ethnographers who want to present their work as aesthetic integration "seek rather a means of evoking the world without representing it" (p. 190).

Neither discourse nor the text can determine or control rhetorical effects. Tyler (1986, p. 135) argued that because texts are read in various ways by myriad readers, the meanings of texts may well be the sum of their misreadings. Because ambiguity and subjectivity are inherent in the presentation and interpretation of texts, the model goals of objectivity, clarity, and precision in traditional research texts may be impossible. In short, every attempt to create precision and coherence in representation will be equivocal and incomplete, insufficient if measured by the traditional norms and rules of argumentation.

To take it one step further, if the purpose is to break the frames we have arbitrarily set around the ways we present what it is we think we know, the form should also break frame. This article attempts to break the frame of traditional ethnographic reporting, to make readers think about many things while forming their own impressions. Of course, the reader might mention here, "You're framing your attempts to break frames," to which I can only nod my head. It is what we ethnographic researchers do, this building of frames for understanding. Perhaps the next questions would be, What materials do we use to build our frames? Why do we build certain frames and not others? And even more important, In what hidden places do data reside in our studies of the Other?

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To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being. (van Manen, 1990, p. 43)

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### *Research Journal*

I am exhausted, my hands hurt from transcribing research notes and transcripts. But my mind is spinning out field and code memos and I fear to let them drift away. I'm starting to see the sweatshirts everywhere. Those white letters glaring at me every time I turn around. Most people I've talked to don't

even think about the phrase when they wear the shirt, and here I am, obsessing about it. Would any shirt advertising that bar be just as popular? Or would any bar with the phrase *Go Ugly Early* be just as popular? It seems to be the *place* with the mystique, not just the shirts or the phrase. And even as I associate the expression with the place, one could just as easily explore the graffiti, the shape, the people, and the traditions. Yet, there's that phrase, and it either lies like a veneer over the top of everything or it is saturated into the very walls of this place. Either way, you can smell and feel it like ancient spilt beer and cigarette smoke.

Express yourself, baby. Don't repress yourself. Madonna sings that, not that she has anything to do with this project. Just came to the forefront of my mind, lined up with the rest of the thoughts and jumped out onto the paper when it was its turn. Several colleagues and I are going to go to the bar and observe the sweatshirt in action. I'm not really in the mood to hang out in the fishbowl, frankly. I have enough trouble at bars. I don't want to be more conspicuous than usual, in this small midwestern town where any clothing remotely resembling urban garb causes people to stare curiously. And I've had enough years of the bar scene. I am so sick of that scene. Played it, performed it, been there, done that, drank that drink, got that T-shirt. It is the same tape playing over and over and over. Not only in my head but in the place, as I walk through the door of "anybar" in "anytown." I walk through the door and the tape starts rolling. It's the same rerun of the same black comedy. Maybe the names and faces and shapes of the barstools change. But otherwise, business as usual.

It shouldn't surprise me that I never look into people's faces or eyes. I always wonder why I avoid looking directly at people, unless I know them. I'm not shy, that's certain. I have no trouble with strangers or talking in crowds or being a part of stuff. But I always avoid eye contact, face contact. A couple of years ago, it occurred to me that I couldn't remember what people looked like. Even people I knew well eluded me; their eye color, their bone structure, their build. Absent. I realized I would never be any good picking people out of a lineup. I think, basically, that I don't like looking too closely at other people because I am afraid to find out what they are looking at. And I am afraid they are looking at me. So I don't look at them so I don't see they are looking at me and I can remain anonymous to a certain extent.

People have told me I am somewhat oblivious to the gaze of others. It's true that I don't notice particular incidents, but I would never think of myself as oblivious. I know, I feel it, I sense that people are staring. I'm not trying to be conceited when I say that. I think most women get stared at a lot, for many reasons—mostly to do with the way they look, of course. Sometimes I wish—more than anything else—that I wouldn't be stared at. And then, in the next thought, I have to withdraw the wish because I'm starting to wonder how I would feel if no one ever looked at me again. What would happen to my sense of self? Scary thought, that. One time I experienced anonymity in a bar. I had

just played volleyball and looked like hell and went into a bar with the rest of the volleyball team. I walked around in the bar and had a great time, and for the first time in my life, did not feel a single shiver on the back of my neck. Blissfully smooth, my skin, never a shimmer of hairs at the nape, undisturbed. And in a public place, no less. Once, it only happened once. What would I give to have that feeling all the time? Anything. Ha! What would I feel if that were my *only* choice, constant slumbering of the sixth sense because *nobody noticed*. . . . Sick and wrong, that skeleton. But then again, maybe not such a skeleton if it's embedded in a larger social structure whereby women have been trained to do the right thing, walk the right way, conduct one's every action in order to be observed and admired, believing eventually that to be noticed (read: judged) is the same as being loved.

Regardless, and back to the previous point, I'm not really in the mood to play the game at the bar while conducting a study. I suppose if I have a drink at the bar down the street before I go to Jake's, I won't be so nervous. Maybe I won't hate it. Maybe I won't want to slink into a corner. Maybe I won't get brushed up against. Maybe I won't fall into the trap of playing the game and playing it better than anyone else because if I'm going to be in the system, I want to be IN the system and succeed in making it MINE. As long as power moves are going to be made in this place, let me make some and be equal. Let me play it better than they do. Let them want me. They'll never take me or have me. Let me be more powerful, more strong, more cunning, more wild, more outrageous, more of everything than they could dream of being. Let me be more peaceful, more wise, more soft. Let me be the one they look up to, the one they admire, the one they want to be like. Let me be more noble. Let me show them what it can be, what *they* could be, what they could be a part of if they could only get over themselves (as if I am over myself).

Ha! What a joke! On me! Step back into reality, and please shut the closet door on your way out. Yikes! I've been typing all that garbage and staring at the *Starry Night* painting on my wall, thinking of all the things I wish I was, and all the ways I want to be. And one statement snaps me out of it because I realize that I'm such a goon for talking *me me me*, and then saying to *them* (who are, of course, different from me, oh Me, so in the mood and mode of magnanimity and egocentrism): "Get over yourselves." HA!!! Let me end the litany by saying instead, "Let me pour honey all over myself to make me sweet and let the bees come." Smart, very smart. . . . Right.

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Dear Annette,

I really enjoyed reading this manuscript, but to tell you the truth, there are some parts I would take out if I were you. I am not sure you want to expose yourself so much, as with the research diary entry wherein you draw perilously close to your own "skeletons." I would recommend a revision wherein you remove most of the personal references and simply stick to the

ethnographic reporting. This seems a better way to present yourself to your academic colleagues. [Excerpt from a letter sent by a colleague who was reviewing a draft of this piece]

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The ethnographic text is not only not an *object*, it is not the *object*; it is instead a *means*, the *meditative vehicle*. . . . It is emergent rather than given. (Tyler, 1986, pp. 129, 133)

As we have come to understand in interpretive schools of thought, the separation of reader, author, and participant is flawed and arbitrary. However, this distinction appears to be still necessary in the academy in that we do not accept fragmented thinking-in-process or the unexplained insertion of the researcher's experience into the research report. Even as we acknowledge that knowledge is fragmentary, partial, constructed, and so forth, we are still uncomfortable with fragmented, partial academic reports where the messy construction of knowledge is made visible. Tyler's (1986) argument about the emergent form of ethnography is compelling in a hypertext, multimedia world where real and virtual no longer have comfortably solid definitions.

My own understanding of the phrase *Go Ugly Early* colors my interpretation from start to finish, so it must be acknowledged, can be interpreted, should be scrutinized. So too should the reader interrogate the understanding he or she brings to the reading.

The expression does not live only on the backs of Jake's sweatshirts, although from this place the expression addresses the observer as well as the wearer. As we live, we encounter this phrase, or many like it. As we encounter this specific phrase here in this interpretation, it derives meaning from our own experiences before the reading of this piece and also as the reading continues. The expression also lives in the attitudes and behaviors of those who execute the directives of *Go Ugly Early*, whether or not they utter the phrase or wear the sweatshirt. And as they live it, we live it, because our lives are inextricably linked in a dense tapestry of interconnected threads.

To study my own background is to offer the reader one of the voices that influenced the telling of this story. The insertion of the researcher's experience need not be self(ish) expression or venting, although this is not always absent. It reveals one way in which the phrase *Go Ugly Early* plays with our knowledge of self and others and our enactment of everyday life. At the same time, the insertion of the researcher's experience is limited and limiting. One can readily see the complications of presenting a sole female's perspective on the matter. This calls attention to the limitations in any account seeking to be dialogic. In this case, although the reader, male or female, will add his or her own interpretation to the mix of data, the participants are present only in the voice I give them. Ultimately, my attempt to frame knowledge of the phrase *Go Ugly Early* may intersect with the reader's response, but without the par-

ticipation of the actual study participants—except via what they uttered, I captured, and I then re-presented here. The data continue to shift, the interpretation can suit the author and the individual reader, yet understanding remains partial, incomplete.

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"Hey, do your feet hurt?"

"Huh?" Lauren said, turning around. It was one of the guys she'd seen in the mirror earlier. She thought she knew him from somewhere, but couldn't remember where.

"Cause you look like you just dropped down from heaven," he continued.

Stunned, she repeated, "Huh?" *Oh great, that was stupid. Nice move, very articulate.*

"Ha! Just kidding! But you never know when it might work, so I keep trying it out. Seriously, don't I know you? My buddies and I were noticing you two—actually Greg over there was afraid to come talk to you." She glanced over his shoulder to where he was pointing. Greg glanced over, raised his head and glass in greeting.

"You should tell him not to be so nervous," Lauren replied. "We won't bite. At least I don't think Jill bites. Jill, you haven't bit anyone lately, have you?"

"Huh?" Jill turned around, "Oh! Hi! Um, what were you saying?"

"He's—I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Drew."

"Oh. Drew here was wondering if we were biting people tonight and I told him I didn't think so."

Jill laughed and replied, "Oh, OK. Um, no. At least not at the moment. Hmmm . . . depends on who they are, I suppose."

Drew squeezed between Jill and Lauren, who were still standing at the bar. "Man, it's crowded in here," he said as he signaled to the bartender. "So what are you guys doing here?"

"Oh, just hanging out. Drinking," Jill replied.

Lauren joined in, "Definitely. Drinking. Definitely. We're supposed to meet some friends here later, but we thought we'd come early to try to find a seat. But we're obviously not getting anywhere fast. I can't believe there's a line already."

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Phil and I talked for several hours at Bar X about what he and his seven buddies do there. He told me that the primary purpose for going out with this group of guys is "not only to attempt to pick up women, but it's also to slam the people who are attempting to pick up women. It's a game. All us guys are mean to each other." During the course of the evening, I watched and audiotaped these friends, witnessing their interactions with each other, with

women they wanted, and with women they did not want. I am sure that part of their evening's behavior was exaggerated for the benefit of the curious anthropologist with the tape recorder. Yet these seven male friends declared that they know what it means to live the phrase *Go Ugly Early*. Here, in the evening's discourse, was an embodied, living, and breathing enactment of "going ugly early."

The phrase may mean different things to different people, but for these guys, *Go Ugly Early* is closely associated with "beer goggling." Through my conversations with Phil and other male friends familiar with this particular meaning of the phrase, I have come to understand that going ugly early is the result of a complex set of goals, behaviors, and outcomes. One of the primary goals of going to a bar, according to countless undergraduate men I talked with during the course of this study, is to eventually take a woman home to have sex.

Of course, the more attractive the woman is, the better off the male is, both in terms of his own pleasure and in winning the respect of other men. According to Phil, the males in his group do not just play the game for fun, they play to win (big surprise). And taking home the best looking woman in the bar is definitely "winning." However, the chances of taking home the "best" female in the bar are low. Therefore, the options are to take an "ugly" woman home or take no one home. Because either option results in "getting shit from the rest of the guys," getting laid is better than not getting laid.

According to Phil, another important goal of going to a bar is to hang out and drink with friends. It is interesting that friendship—at least in this group—is demonstrated by "giving each other a hard time. We're really mean to each other." As I watched and listened, I realized that any behavior, friend's or foe's, could be responded to with derision, laughter, and taunting.

This type of play, as well as aggression toward one another, seems to be closely related to the consumption of alcohol. The consumption of alcohol is also clearly associated with "beer goggles." The concept of beer goggling is described fairly simply by Phil and his friends; as the consumption of alcohol increases, accurate perception and vision decreases, so that things (women) that are normally not within acceptable norms of beauty get more and more appealing as the evening progresses. Therefore, it is more likely that at late hours, a man will attempt to pick up a woman he would otherwise not be attracted to. Now we get back to going ugly early. The logic goes something like this: If having sex with an ugly person is better than having no sex, and if a guy knows that at the end of the evening ugly women will appear deceptively and falsely beautiful through beer goggles, then going for an ugly girl earlier in the evening is more likely to result in getting laid, and it costs less money because you do not have to get drunk to choose her.

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Academics in Scotland have found proof of the so-called "beer goggles" effect, following a study involving 80 students. The researchers wanted to measure the

infamous phenomenon by which members of the opposite sex become more attractive more alcohol is consumed. They found that men and women who have drunk a moderate amount of alcohol find the faces of the opposite sex 25% more attractive than their sober counterparts. ("Beauty Is in the Eye," 2002)

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Phil: You can't go with a fat chick when you're not drunk yet. It's three o'clock in the morning and I got the ol' beer goggles on and I think, "Huh! Yeah! Check that out, boys!" And if all the other guys are drunk, they'll say, "Yeah, go for it."

Annette: But if they're not drunk will the other guys still—what, protect you?

Phil: Hell, No! Cuz they're not goin' home with her.

Annette: But wait a minute, won't they still give you shit about going home with her?

Phil: Yeah, afterwards. They want to make sure you do it first with that person. Then they can give you shit later. That's what we're going to do to him (gesturing toward friend at the bar). We're gonna wait till he—see that fat chick he's talking to?

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I cannot say that these males were going ugly early during the evening in terms of picking out ugly women to seduce. Their behavior was not so specific. Rather, they engaged in actions and conversations that reinforced and reproduced a particular attitude toward women and relationships that would permit and valorize the act of going ugly early. They observed and scrutinized every woman they saw or knew, including my friend Julie and me, focusing specifically on two body parts—breasts and buttocks. As women walked by, they would be scrutinized and evaluated based on the perceived size of these body parts. No other part of the female body was discussed, ever.

At one point in the evening, I saw and waved to a female friend across the bar. Phil asked me whom I was waving to and when I pointed out Alice, the following conversation ensued:

Phil: Yeah, we noticed her earlier tonight.

Annette: Why?

Phil: —hooters. Whatdya mean, why?

Annette: Well, I was just curious.

Phil: —those big ol'—

Annette: Hooters?

Julie: Her *hooters*? You mean her *breasts*?

Phil: Hey! You guys have your definitions, I have mine.

Annette: Well, I just wanted to clarify because you never know what you might be meaning.

Phil: Yes, OK, I'm sorry, yeah, her breasts. Her breasts. Her breasts. Her breasts are very large.

As the conversation and the evening continued, Julie and I were subjected to not only the groups' observations and evaluations of other women's anat-



omy but also their comments about our own anatomy. Once, when Phil was talking about women wearing jackets around their waists to hide their “big ol’ butts,” I said, “I can’t believe you’re saying that.” Reaching for my jacket, I said jokingly, “Excuse me, I have to wrap this jacket around my waist,” to which he replied, “Hey, you’ve got a nice pooper. You ain’t got any reason to wrap that there around your waist.” Stunned, I wondered at the utter audacity and crudeness of these men. I do not know why the term “pooper” put me over the top, rather than the seemingly infinite number of other terms they tossed out. Later, another member of the group, interested in closely examining the size of my butt, actually lifted my skirt for a more “accurate” evaluation. With my hand balled up in a fist, I hit him straight across the jaw as hard as I could. Though it hurt him, he laughed. At me? At himself? It does not really matter. The more important observation is that he felt the urge and the freedom to behave this way in the first place. I was, and in many ways still am, baffled.

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Why didn’t I leave? I felt sick every time I talked with these guys. That night at the bar was a horrific research experience. How could they say those things?! What kind of game is this?

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Linear arguments constructed in traditional forms give us a false sense of security about the solidity or unity of our interpretations as well as the ways we arrive at those interpretations. In other words, the mind does not always come to understand a concept or a culture in a straightforward fashion. We comprehend the world in moments, fragments, glimpses. I might see something one way one day and completely revise my understanding of it another day based on any number of things that happen: conversations I have that spark new ideas, scents on the wind that provoke particular memories, movies I watch, parks I meander through to collect thoughts and leaves. We know, in this postmodern and media-saturated era, that thoughts do not come pre-packaged and linear, yet there is much persistence in presenting social research to the contrary. I am not the first to notice this, by far. I just want to add another example of the messiness of actuality in the process of interpreting.

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Only now, 5 years after collecting those data, I understand that if I were perceived as fat or ugly by these participants, I would not have been invited to hang out with them. Their privilege is to draw tight boundaries of what is acceptable and what is to be immediately scorned, mocked, and rejected. My privilege was to be within their boundaries. I willingly allowed them to

believe so and willingly went there in person and in my head so that I could get the data. One might ask again, but with different intent: Where do data come from? What are we willing to do to get it?

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Annette: So what's the purpose of the game?

Phil: There are no rules. It's not like a game—no definitions.

Annette: Right, but is there any purpose to it?

Phil: No. It just happens.

Annette: So you just cut each other down?

Phil: Hell yeah! All the time.

Annette: And the purpose is to see how far you can slam the other guy down?

Phil: Oh yeah! Oh. Yeah.

Annette: If you can put him further down, you'll be more elite?

Phil: No one can put me further down than I've always been, because . . . I can accept reality. We do it to keep other in—to give each other reality checks, by saying, "Well, last weekend, she was with someone else," to keep him from—from getting hurt—

Annette: To keep him from falling in love?

Phil: Yeah. That's mostly it. Greg falls in love all the time. He might really get hurt. If he wants to fall in love with a girl, he's going to hear us and then he'll make his own decision and then go do whatever he wants to do. But we're gonna put the effort to protect him as far as being hurt. But if he's gonna take someone fat like that out there home [points to girl with Greg], we know he's not going to fall in love so we don't care.

Annette: But if he's gonna get hurt you'll give him shit?

Phil: No, we won't give him shit about someone he cares about. We'll give him shit once. Once. One time. One time.

Annette: But not over and over?

Phil: But you see the fat chick, if he took the fat chick home, we'd tease him forever.

Annette: But you'll only tease him once about her [the "not so fat" chick]?

Phil: Yeah, cuz she's not that bad.

[a long silence]

Phil: We are a very close group. A very close group.

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There is so much going on in my head, I do not quite know how to say what I am thinking so the reader will understand, which in many ways supports the point I am trying to make. I could use the analogy of improvisational jazz. Or remembering a conversation a colleague and I had about this ethnography last week, I could use an artist like Picasso to help me visualize what I am trying to do through this piece.

Indeed, the premise of this entire project is that we neither come to a *single* understanding of the expression *Go Ugly Early* nor use the *same processes* to come to our particular understandings. It would seem then that various interpretations are like the cubist phase of Picasso's work, the subject seen from a

variety of perspectives. Even as these perspectives might be rendered in a particular way, they are also read in a multitude of ways, and each reader comes to an individual understanding of the expression that may or may not be coherent, singular, or in line with what the author intended. In other words, meaning does not suddenly become clear once I have written the report. I may have a particular set of ideas I want to convey, and a particular set of interpretations I want to encourage, but meaning is never settled, no matter how “final” the version of the report may seem.

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Trevor: Hey Philman, do you wanna fuck her? [talking about a woman approaching the group]

Phil: Who?

Trevor: [pointing to the woman] Go ahead, fuck her! I did.

Greg: I did twice, yeah yeah. Get her in the ass.

Phil: [to the woman, who had just greeted the group] Hey, I'll bet you just think I'm just some sleazy—

Woman: [to Phil] You're with Heidi aren't you? You're Heidi's boyfriend!

Phil: —You just think I'm cheap and easy, don't you?!

Woman: I don't think you're cheap and easy. I think I *love* you and if you go home with me [pause], *nothing's* gonna happen.

Phil: Then why would I go home with you?

Woman: Just to say you can.

Woman: You're so cute.

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### *Research Journal*

Hmmm, should I include a segment here on how the reader might interpret the previous excerpt from a tape-recorded interaction at Bar X? Who is going ugly early here? Are certain characters *being* ugly? Another line of questioning might be directed at the author who chose to reproduce this particular segment in this particular way. Is the author framing the expression? What definition of *Go Ugly Early* is the author trying to illuminate here? Why has the author chosen this definition? One might even ask why all the males whose names were known by the researcher were given pseudonyms, so their names are made up, yet the woman, whose name was not known, remains “woman,” a category rather than an individual with a name.

I am thinking I ought to provide my rationale for making the choices I did. I am thinking I should provide a close interpretation of how this conversation constructs particular attitudes toward women, how certain social structures are reproduced and perpetuated. I am thinking I should discuss how these discourses embody some of the ways people go ugly early.

Or I could simply revise my interpretation based on this critical self-reflection; change the “woman” to an actual name and reconsider or at least justify the presentation of this particular segment of discourse.

That’s the slippery slope, is it not? Figuring out what to leave in, what to cull out, how to guide the reader through the presentation of discourse, and how to help readers understand what it all means while being self-reflexive about the researcher’s role in the process. Here, I supply both the original writing and this train of thought as a means of allowing the reader to see some of the work in progress.

Through the fragmentation of interpretation, we can more clearly see some of the incoherencies of meaning making. Many scholars have made the point that knowing is never universal or absolute. Language does not seem to always work toward or in accordance with some grand narrative or universal truths. Rather, our knowledge of “truth” is somewhat tentative, and the human agent is one who “constructs interpretations of the world” (Cooper & Burrell, 1988, p. 94). Rorty (1989) called this position “irony,” the realization that the terms we use to describe ourselves and others are always subject to change and that “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (p. 73). Rorty’s definition of an “ironist” bears repeating in full:

I shall define an “ironist” as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (p. 73)

My project in this article is not one of simply representing the voices of the participants. I am speaking for and with others, using my own understanding of the expression *Go Ugly Early* to help me select their words to make my claims. Yet simultaneously, I am trying to decenter authority by fragmenting the singularity of interpretation—through the form of the report. As Grumet (1991) said, “Every telling is a partial prevarication,” and “multiple accounts splinter the dogmatism of a single tale. If they undermine the authority of the teller, they also free her from being captured by the reflection provided in a single narrative” (p. 72). Of course, I should point out that as much as I want to provide multiple and decentered accounts, my understanding of the world passes through my body and my being and my life and I make choices as the author. About this subject, I’m pretty biased, because I live—forever, it seems—in the grip of the gaze of the men in this study.

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[Sitting in my car, after 2:00 a.m., outside Bar X with the tape recorder still running]

Annette: The point is that they do it to each other to hurt each other and it seems like an elaborate game—

Julie: —Playing a “my dick is bigger” game—

Annette: —Yeah. Right. But they do a lot of things to hurt each other, *and* they do a lot of things to protect each other also. But all of this time they say two primary things. One: “My friends are the most important thing ever. They last a lot longer than women.” And the second thing they say is, “I want a woman that will last forever. And I want to have kids with her. And I want to only get married once in my life and that’s gonna be forever.” Phil said it on the dance floor. And Chunky said it too. But they play this game and they make it—and they build it up, and they perpetuate. . . . Well, I guess we all do, I mean, we’re not any less guilty. But they cut each other down to build themselves up.

Julie: Exactly. We’re walking out of that bar and Phil says something about “cockblocking.” Says something like, “Hey, if one of the guys wants some chick, we’re going to step in the way. We’re gonna get in the way of that.” Then Chunky jumps in, “Yeah, but you know, what if that’s like the woman I’m supposed to be with forever, I’m gonna be really pissed.” And Joe and Phil say, “Ha! Well, you know, we’re gonna fuck with that!” And here’s this man—the rest of this guy’s life may depend on whether his friends approve of his actions or disapprove and get in the way, or fuck with it. Poor Chunky! There may be some woman that has a wide ass who he connects with, who he’s thinking he might want to marry . . . and up comes Phil, and up comes Joe—gonna cockblock him. He’s telling them, “I’d be pissed at that.” And they’re just saying, “Yeah, well, you know, that’s the way it is.”

Annette: They’re saying, “That’s part of the game.”

Julie: And I want to say, “No! Those are the consequences that are gonna fuck his life over! Why don’t they think about that?!”

Annette: The thing about it that makes it worse is that the prerequisite for being with the woman you really want to be with is that you have to be strong enough to block the cockblock. Phil says that if a man wants to be with a woman, he’ll block the cockblock. He’ll blow off the cockblock and do what he wants anyway. So they’re fostering a sense of invincibility and confidence and the strong self.

Julie: How many men could do that?

Annette: But that’s what masculine hegemony is all about.

Julie: Right. You just saw a lot of what it’s about.

Annette: Yes. The fact that no matter what they do, they will get and give each other shit about it.

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The anthropologist listens to as many voices as she can and then chooses among them when she passes their opinions to members of another culture. The choice is not arbitrary, but then neither is the testimony. However, no matter what format the anthropologist/reporter/writer uses, she eventually takes the responsibility for putting down the words, for converting their possibly fleeting opinions into a text. (Wolf, 1992, p. 11)

[Storytelling is a] negotiation of power. The aesthetic remove is designed to protect story from having to accommodate to the forms and expectations of the ideological present that it addresses; the anthropological stipulations on inter-

pretation acknowledge the power of the act that designates meaning. (Grumet, 1991, p. 68)

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### *Field Notes*

My intense focus in the directions I choose comes directly from my experience of the world and my understanding of the social world of college bars. I have a particular agenda in this representation. I could patch together other representations from the transcripts of the interviews and my life experiences. Undoubtedly, others could do the same. Probably next week, in a couple of months, a year or 2, or when I'm old and gray, I will disagree with what I wrote. Probably the people whose words I used to patch together this story would have some disagreement with what I wrote. Actually, I'm not even sure I agree with what I'm writing, especially when I look at my own place in the game.

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Phil: So, what are the chances of us getting naked tonight?

Annette: Oh, about the same as me going outside and getting a suntan right now.

Phil: So I got a chance, huh?

Annette: Yeah, if there's an odd freak of nature—

Phil: Well, I like to know what my chances are.

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The answer was never an obvious or a simple "No." It was a teasing complicity in the idea of "Maybe." Why did I elect to respond in this way? Because Phil was handsome? Because he didn't include me in the barrage of horrific, demeaning discourse about women included in the "ugly" category? Will I answer these questions in this report or simply leave them hanging as self-righteous interrogations of interpretive methodology without the accompanying tension of offering everything up.

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*"I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."*

*"I don't see," said the Caterpillar. (Carroll, 1941, chap. 1)*

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The guys I interviewed were showing off. There seemed to be a lot of male posturing because two women with tape recorders were asking them to "act

naturally." They had, as it were, license to be more extreme, more disgusting than they might otherwise be. After reading some of the comments to my friend Devon, he agreed, and added that based on his (substantial) experience of the bar scene, they were "definitely trying to impress" me. "Annette," he said, "I've been there. All my friends and I have been there. There's a lot of hidden truth there, but it also sounds like they are exaggerating." I wonder if their exaggeration and showing off should be considered when I interpret what is meant by what is said. In other words, should I give them the benefit of the doubt and minimize (or invalidate) my reactions/interpretation? On the other hand, if they are exaggerating, maybe I should ask, *What* are they exaggerating? And *why*? And why do they feel that they *can* or *should* voice their thoughts and attitudes in the ways they do, exaggerated or not?

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Joe: So do ya think you'll have the opportunity to get naked with her or not [speaking about a woman that approached the group earlier in the evening]?

Phil: Actually, she won't tell me. She says I'm not nice to her—Whoa! Check that out! I think you could call it a movie screen—in a theater. We got a screen—

Joe: —a big ol mother fucker. Ain't no beer goggles here!

Phil: I feel like—Hey, see that white underwear? We could show a movie there! I could put a goddamn movie projector there if she bent over—  
[much laughter]

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Things are seldom what they seem. (Gilbert & Sullivan, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, 1878, Act II)

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Phil: If I'm gonna get married, I'm gonna get married one time in life. If it doesn't work out, I'm never getting married again. I may be an old man and lonely the rest of my life, but I don't care. I'm that type of person. So I'm going to wait a while. Have fun. What's really weird [about my ex-girlfriend who dumped me because I wouldn't marry her] is that I don't really care. I love her, whatever, but I have to get on with my life, I can't dwell in the past, so I—I've got friends and friends are the most important thing in life. Friendships are forever, but relationships may not be. So you've got to move on. You can't live in the past, you have to live in the future.

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I've been thinking about and writing this stuff and framing men as if they were the only players in this game: Men as perpetrators, women as victims. While I'm pointing things out, I might add that my analysis of *Go Ugly Early* is very heterosexist. I don't intend to be so narrow-minded, but I do mean to focus on one form of relations, which tends to erase those other forms outside my tunnel vision. I don't really mean to do this, and I don't think this flaw is

particularly unique. I think that in many well-intentioned academic enterprises we become very focused on a single path of interpretation that traps us by limiting our vision. But even the best intentions do not excuse dogmatism. The most I choose to do here is bring it up as an issue, acknowledge my perspective, and offer a potential means of identifying and breaking habitual ways of thinking during the interpretive process.

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Phil: This tape is gonna be really weird. I don't know where in the hell we started our conversation, and somehow we ended up about me and my ex-girlfriend. That's the weirdest thing in the world. You're like—on tape here, you're getting a part of me that none of my friends even know about.

Annette: Well, let me just say that they won't ever know about it.

Phil: That's fine if they do—I don't really care about it.

Annette: Right, but, I would never use your name or tell anyone about it that knows you.

Phil: Thank you. I appreciate that. It's weird. I'm opening up to you. I don't even know you.

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The narrative fragments presented here—derived from research journals, field notes, actual transcripts of interviews and recorded conversations, fiction, and scholarly literature—present a bricolage of ideas and images. Although it wants to be nonlinear, it remains a fairly straightforward argument, even as it appears in fragmented form. On one hand, the tension between my personal and analytical stance to the subject matter was too great to allow for either a direct and logical argument or an account claiming to be objective. On the other hand, my compilation of this analysis is driven not only by a desire to present the story but also to have it published, which requires, if only in my mind, some adherence to traditional academic writing conventions.

My goal in engaging in this type of work is to explore how we come to know something about another and then, how we come to speak of this with our colleagues in the written piece. Here, you witness my attempt to strike a good balance between giving an account of culture and giving an account of my experiences as these intersect with the role of researcher for this project. It is worth noting that while trying to walk the fine line between discussing the subject and discussing the process of doing the research, I exercised a great deal of caution in the attempt to avoid the slippery slope that can result from self-reflexivity. Whether I have been successful is somewhat less determined by me than the reader.

The process of arranging ideas into their place on these pages is one of making a subtle or not so subtle argument. At the same time, however, it is also an interpretive process. I learn about my own interpretive frameworks as



I place various pieces of data near others. Cutting and pasting late into the night yields interesting patterns in my own logic. Tracing my own patterns over multiple versions of the research report accomplishes an important part of the interpretive act. The resulting mosaic is an arbitrary stopping point, which calls to mind the quote at the beginning of this article by Madeline Grumet (1991), who noted that with every version of an article, we momentarily stop the flood and swirl of thought so others can read and engage what we think.

If this were truly a fragmented narrative, appearing in hypertext on the computer screen, it would come closer to the idea behind the method. The patterning of fragments here is intended, as Grumet (1991) said, to “make it possible for us to go beyond and around the text” (p. 67). The juxtaposition of fragmented narratives “invites reflection and choice” and in some ways requires “participants to both explore situations and make choices within them” (Grumet, 1991, p. 75).

Put differently, I choose the juxtapositioning of the narrative fragments, which urges the reader to make certain connections within the constraints I draw. Ideally, the reader is not presented with only one path to follow. Realistically, of course, the reader and the subjects are not given as many choices as the author. For example, in the third version of this article, the conversation between Phil and me ended as shown above, when he says, “I’m opening up to you. I don’t even know you.” However, in the original first version of this article, I included the excerpt you see below as the final conversational exchange.

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### *Original Ending*

Phil: So I’m officially asking you out for a date, it’s on record.

Me: Where are you taking me?

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I included that exchange because of the irony involved in my response to Phil; like a surprise ending, it potentially shifts the roles established by earlier material. My goal was to evoke a sense of partiality in research reporting, as if the story were not finished or as if the researcher had not gotten it quite right. I removed it early on, for various reasons, including my colleagues’ perceptions that it could compromise me in some way. I add it here to open up another path for sense making.

Rommetveit (1980) elaborately illustrated that one can never really understand what the Other truly means. The idea of reader and author reaching mutual understanding “[cannot be] accounted for in terms of either unequiv-

ocally shared knowledge of the world or linguistically mediated literal meaning" (p. 109). Not only is meaning always ambiguous but also the processes we engage in to make sense of the world are neither linear nor smooth. Rather, they are seamed through and through, more of a patchwork or mosaic than a coherent, flawless, and stable whole.

Even so, we make certain *assumptions* of coherence and understanding, probably so we do not go insane. We assume that we can be understood, that we understand others, and that we can, to a degree, know what is meant by what is discursively performed. As Rommetveit (1980) said, these assumptions are a "self-fulfilling *faith* in a shared world" (p. 109). In light of us, the reader may be likely to interpret the above as merely a glitch, rather than a serious conflict to the argument now drawing to a close. It is intriguing to consider the extent to which even deliberately provocative choices in interpretation or writing may not make much of a difference in a world of presumed order and authorial power. Still, drawing attention to the author's choices can reveal the process of invention with the hope of disruption and multiplicity.

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### *Alternate Ending No. 2*

Phil: So I'm officially asking you out for a date, it's on record.

Me: Where are you taking me?

Phil: Anywhere you want to go.

Me: Noplace is where I want to go with you. On or off the record.

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This time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. (Carroll, 1941, chap. 7)

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