

MACHINES AND MASCULINITIES ON MY MIND:

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A YOUTH WORKER

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ABSTRACT

Like a lot of people who work regularly with youth, I grew up with experiences—and forms of privilege (racial, gender, economic/educational, etc.)—that are significantly different from the experiences of many of the young people with whom I've worked and developed relationships. While my broader interest is in the norms and expectations around different kinds of “masculinity” and how they affect attitudes and behaviors among youth, I am focusing this project on an autoethnographic exploration and analysis of an experience of my own that was formative in terms of my struggles with identity and masculinity. Importantly, I have found that reflecting on and writing about that personal experience has helped me not only to understand myself and those who influenced me, but also to realize that the gaps between my experiences and those of the young people with whom I work may not be as wide as I had imagined them to be. I hope that this project will give me the confidence to continue writing and to build stronger relationships with youth, and further, that my approach to this project might motivate other youth workers to look more carefully at how their own experiences have shaped their approaches to their work.

In my past work in schools and my current work in public libraries, I have had many occasions to observe boys' behaviors and interactions with each other. In the specific spaces and communities where I have worked, most of these boys have been in their early teens and not White and have come from urban households at or near the federal poverty line. A significant number of them have also been multilingual and come from families who have recently come to the United States as immigrants or refugees. The specific behaviors that I regularly observe range from the more positive and pro-social, like joking around and playing computer games together, to the more negative and anti-social, such as bullying and fighting. The boundary between these opposing behaviors is usually blurry and dependent on a lot of contextual factors. The conflicts don't seem often to lead to the isolation or ostracizing of individuals; peer groups are more often disrupted by families' mobility than by fallings out among group members.

The specific behavioral quality that I wanted to explore with this NorthStar project was the “toughness” or the desire to be tough that I've witnessed in a lot of the boys with whom I've worked. In academic research, this toughness is usually linked to systems of hypermasculinity or hegemonic masculinities, which set cultural norms and expectations for male/masculine identities. One reason that I wanted to study this kind of “toughness” was because it seems to be so closely linked with youth attitudes toward school and learning, where studiousness and good grades signify the opposite of toughness: weakness and conformity. As Willis (1977) found in his classic study of working-class, English boys, the transgressive attitudes and behaviors of the “lads” were largely a product of their “caged resentment” (p. 12) toward authority and toward other boys whose conformity the lads regarded as an inability to think or act for themselves. Another reason that I wanted to learn more about hegemonic masculinities and youth was my concern that the attitudes and

behavior of some of the boys I have worked with might have (or might have already had) negative effects on their capacities to talk about their feelings or develop close friendships in which they could feel secure and not like they've always got to prove themselves. While a number of studies have dispelled stereotypes about boys being unable to be vulnerable or talk about their emotions (e.g., Knight, 2014; Randall, Jerdén, Öhman, Starrin, & Flacking, 2016; Way, 2011), and while other research has illuminated the ways that "toughness" is necessary for some boys in navigating difficult or unjust social conditions (Gutmann, 1996/2007; Rios, 2011), it is still true that, in later adolescence, many boys tend to lose their earlier, intimate friendships with other boys and become less articulate with their emotions (Way, 2011). So, I worry most that, for a few of the youth I know, the pressure to hide emotions and always appear invulnerable might lead them to bury their feelings, and possibly even harm either themselves or others.

Although there has already been a lot written about this subject, I don't know if my interest would be so strong were it not for some of my own experiences growing up, "from a boy to a man." I was raised in a mostly rural part of southwest-central Ohio, with a mother who was an elementary school teacher and a father who worked on the assembly line at International Harvester's Springfield plant. During my and my sister's earlier childhood, my parents struggled financially—my mom had taken leave from teaching to stay home with us, my dad was laid off a couple times—but we stayed in the same house and had some extended family on my mom's side, who helped support us. Plus, both my parents were able to obtain part-time work—my mom selling Mary Kay cosmetics, my dad splitting firewood—that helped to make ends meet. Although my parents' interactions with each other were more often conflictual than caring, they both pushed me and my sister to do well in school and to envision for ourselves lives beyond where we grew up. For various reasons, my sister and I were both social outsiders in school (in different ways), but academically, we both excelled far beyond the normal expectations of the schools we attended, where most students were expected after graduation to return to farming, find factory work (which was already becoming scarce), or—for girls—become wives and mothers.

I don't recall that my attitude and behavior at school caused much outward, direct resentment from my peers, but I didn't have many close friendships, either—especially with boys. And so, when I think about not just the race and social class differences of my adolescence but also about the differences in how I related to and socialized with my own peers, I am not at all surprised that I continue to struggle—even where I do have good relationships with youth—with the belief that there is a significant gap between my experiences growing up and what the youth I know are experiencing. This creates an inevitable barrier to doing the work that I would like to do with them. It is partly for this reason that I had hoped initially *not* to write a paper but, instead to do a video/storytelling project with at least one of the boys with whom I have a relationship where I currently work. I felt that such a project would immediately demonstrate either (by failing) the truth of what I already believed or, perhaps—hopefully—that I had underestimated myself and the boys' willingness to talk with someone like me. However, due to a number of factors such as my being overextended with multiple projects, and the irregularity of youths' visits to the library, I realized this spring that my original plans weren't going to work out.

So, while I hope eventually to do some kind of project like that with the youth at the library, I have reframed my NorthStar project as an autoethnographic study, focusing on an experience I shared with my dad, not long after I had left home for college. In addition to recalling and reflecting on my own memories of that event, I had a long conversation about it with my mom, and our talk ranged from the episode itself, to my mom's memories of her childhood, to our shared and different struggles with my dad. I've also spent time looking at some old photographs of myself, my family, and the places where I grew up, and I've done a little research to fill in some of history and details that I didn't already know or remember. The goal of autoethnography, according to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010), is to "use personal experience to illustrate

facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders,” so I have chosen my story both because of the large influence my father has had on my own identity and values and because it might bring into focus some aspects of the culture that shaped us both.

Moreover, I hope that my use of autoethnography will be consistent with the work of those who have questioned and critiqued studies of men and masculinities for their lack of attention to and engagement with feminist theory. As some have pointed out (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; O’Neill, 2015), research on men and masculinities took off in the 1980s, but for the most part, it gave little (if any) attention to the rigorous theoretical work being done on gender in the 1980s and 1990s that spanned fields from feminist studies (e.g., Butler, 1990) to anthropology (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998/2001). More recently, other scholars (e.g., Pease, 2013; Pini & Pease 2013) have noted the failure of studies of men and masculinities to develop theoretical frameworks and research methods that don’t reproduce dominant masculine assumptions about what constitutes knowledge or research (objectivity, distance, positivism, etc.). For the purposes of this paper—and without time or space to go into a deeper discussion of these problems with research on men and masculinities—I am keeping in mind the definition of masculinity proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) in a review of their own and others’ previous research in the field: “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (p. 836). Accordingly, my goal in using autoethnography is to reveal some of the “configurations of practice” from my own past experiences in a way that helps clarify how certain dominant “masculine” values were reproduced, and also how they were (or can be) disrupted by shifting the perspective toward other persons, practices, and values that were also present but less visible to me at the time of those experiences.

Before the accident that night, my dad and I had already spent the better part of the day snowmobiling all over Indian Lake.¹ It was the winter of 1996, and I was home from college for the weekend—my sister, in her first year at the U.S. Air Force Academy, was not there. The day we were out snowmobiling was clear-skied but bitterly cold, and, except where currents were strong, the lake was covered with at least a foot of ice. But, of course, we were dressed in layers with heavy boots, snowmobile suits, and helmets, so the cold didn’t touch us at all as we raced full-throttle across the expanse of the lake. It wasn’t that often that the lake froze like that, so we took advantage of the opportunity to run all-out, without having to worry like we did on land about barbed-wire fences or rocks and other obstacles hidden by the snow. We stopped only for gas and, once, a visit to a bar in Russells Point, where we parked the snowmobiles alongside a dozen others at the sea wall and went inside to join the others—mostly men—with their snowmobile suits half-off and drinks in hand.

¹ Indian Lake is the second largest inland body of water in Ohio, but it isn’t even really a lake—rather, a reservoir that was created in the second half of the nineteenth century as a feeder to the soon-to-be-obsolete canal system.

Once night had fallen and we were back home, my dad took out a map of the lake so that we could plan our night ride. Despite all the ice covering the lake—with the air temperature having dropped into the single digits—we decided to stick to routes we'd already followed during the day, mainly to avoid any ice walls that might have formed around fractures in the lake ice. After getting dressed again and starting the snowmobiles, we took off and passed O'Connor's Point on our way out into the main lake, following others' tracks but not going full-throttle due to the lower visibility. We crossed the biggest section of the lake and headed toward the wide channel between Winnepauken and Wolf Islands, veering southeast into the older and deeper part of the lake. We hadn't been in that area much during the day, so we turned east and started a small loop to turn around and return home. We went more slowly, while heading toward Turkey Foot Island, because we hadn't been on that part of the lake all day. My dad was about fifty yards ahead of me, a little to my right and farther from the islands, when I saw his snowmobile's taillight dip suddenly. In the couple seconds that it took for me to realize he'd hit open water, I found myself heading right into it—not just a slushy, partial hole in the ice, sometimes caused by currents, but a large section of completely open water. My attention shifted from my dad to my own situation, and, within a few seconds, my snowmobile came to a sudden stop in the water, the engine died, and the snowmobile started to sink.

Like many of the adults I knew growing up, I looked forward each winter with hope that we'd have enough snowfall—and, even better, ice on the lake—to go snowmobiling. The snowmobiles that my dad and I were riding were both John Deere Trailfires; they had metallic silver engine covers with red, green, and yellow John Deere stripes down the sides. I've since learned that those models were some of the last that John Deere made—at their plant in Horicon, Wisconsin—after nearly a decade of dabbling in the growing market for snowmobiles. Both were used when my dad bought them, I believe—one from my maternal grandfather after my grandparents had moved to Florida, and the other from a neighbor whose son had been a tool and die maker and a close friend of both my father and my mother's brother.

Now, looking back, I see those two snowmobiles as just a small part of the whole repertoire of internal-combustion-engine machines that filled in the background of my childhood. From multiple used cars and trucks, to snowmobiles, motorcycles, and ATVs, to every size and type of motorboat, and even to lawnmowers and other gas-powered tools, those machines were so ubiquitous that a popular bumper sticker that I remember read, "He who dies with the most toys, WINS!" Although my family did have some awareness of and concern for environmental issues—my dad's dabbling with organic gardening, my sister and I crushing beer cans on weekends so that we could turn them in to be recycled for a couple dollars of baseball card and candy money—no one ever talked about the broader consequences of having all these

machines and burning so much gas. There was, however, plenty of talk about and time spent on the maintenance of the machines—for instance, I remember, not fondly, all the hours that my sister and I spent standing in the lake and scrubbing all the algae and other gunk off the bottom of the pontoon boat we once had. The machines were just a normal part of our way of life, or at least a normal way for most of the men I knew to enjoy their time away from factory work.

The ability of men like my father to be able to afford cars, boats, and other recreational vehicles marked their privilege over those who were not able to secure well-paying manual labor jobs—and it largely guaranteed their own return to the shop floor at the end of each weekend. With both my dad and grandpa working at International Harvester's assembly plant, I grew up hearing lots of stories about factory work and the ways that the men tried to make it more tolerable, such as playing practical jokes on each other, continually engaging management in conflicts, and hanging out after work in bars. And, as I grew older, I became more aware of the toll that the work took on my dad, my grandpa, and numerous other family members and friends who worked in one factory or another. I've read and continue to read histories of and research on working-class cultures, and I see more clearly how their stories and experiences fit into the larger narrative of labor and production in America. Even just a couple decades after the introduction of the assembly line, the harm on workers was already becoming apparent; at a Detroit labor board hearing in the 1930s, a physician testified to the physical and psychological effects of assembly line work, remarking that "there is many a luckless worker today whose limbs and blood and sanity is part of that shiny car on the Boulevard" (Meyer, 2016, p. 12). Although I was still very young at the time, I gained some awareness of this toll when my dad was laid off and when he was hospitalized with sarcoidosis of the lungs, a chronic disease, most likely—but never conclusively proven to have been—triggered by exposure to chemicals at the plant.

The effects of the shop on our lives were, of course, much broader and less direct, especially in terms of our relationships with family and friends. Given all the hours my dad spent at work, it seemed natural that most of his friends were other men that he worked with on the line. Together, they hung out in bars, played in summer softball tournaments, went hunting in the fall, and—annually, during the plant's summer shutdown—went canoe camping along the Little Miami River. Aside from visits with our neighbors at Indian Lake and a couple get-togethers each year with my mom's extended family, my dad's work friends and their spouses made up most of our social circle. We didn't go to church—my dad wouldn't allow it—and my parents weren't involved in any other kinds of organized social groups or activities. Moreover, because my dad didn't want anything to do with his own family, we didn't usually see any of them either, except for a few hours in the afternoon on Christmas Day.

As I grew up, I was so busy with school and school-related activities that I'm not sure if I ever really noticed anything unusual about the fact that my dad didn't involve me very often in activities with his friends. It even seemed natural—given his second-shift work schedule—that we only ever saw him on weekends and for an hour each weekday, after my sister and I got home from school and before he left for work, when we all sat down to an early dinner that my mom always prepared. I also knew that he couldn't often play catch or other sports with me because his lung disease had significantly reduced his lung capacity and made him get short of breath easily, though I never wondered at the fact that he was able to continue doing manual work at the shop for many more years.

In college, when I thought about my relationship with my dad, what stood out most was that I'd never gone hunting with him—nor had he ever invited me. Every fall, my dad and some of his closest work friends would build a blind at the lake and go out early in the morning—usually Mondays, because it was the end of the weekend and none of them had to be back at work until later in the afternoon—to hunt ducks and geese. Of course, I had to be at school on Monday mornings, but that didn't have to be a barrier, as youth where I

grew up were allowed a few excused absences each year for hunting. In fact, hunting and fishing were such a large part of the male culture I knew as a child, that I am surprised now that no one ever brought it to my attention that it was strange that my dad hadn't involved me. My sister and I did do a little fishing, mostly from the dock for crappies and catfish, but that probably had more to do with my grandpa's influence anyway, because he was always more into fishing than hunting.

For years I've wondered why my dad never asked me to go hunting with him. I think that I asked him once, and his reply was that it wasn't something that he thought I would be interested in. My mom also told me one time that my dad had harbored some fears that I might be too effeminate or even gay—since I was so bookish, not any good at sports (at least until high school), and pretty much a failure at trying to find a girlfriend—but I've had a hard time piecing that together with the fact that he did always encourage me and my sister to do well in school and not get “stuck” in Springfield. My dad knew well enough that the kind of well-paid factory work that he did was not something that was going to be available to my generation, and I know for certain that—even if it had been—it wasn't what he wanted for me.

But I've also wondered whether his not involving me more in the activities he participated in with his friends was related to the fact that—like Hoggart's (1957/1998) “scholarship boy”—so many more of my hours each week were spent with my mom, my sister, and my grandma. During the week, of course, with my dad at work—and because we lived outside town, away from any friends I had at school—I spent nearly all of my time around my mom and sister. Then, nearly every Friday, my mom would drive us north to the lake after we got home from school, and we'd spend the evening at my grandparents' house, next door to our own cottage. With my grandpa also working second-shift, the four of us would eat and then spend the evening watching TV. My mom and grandma would sometimes teach us cross-stitching or other crafts, and it became an annual holiday ritual for my sister and me to craft small gifts for all the aunts and uncles and cousins on my mom's side of the family and for a lot of our neighbors at the lake. My dad would drive up to the lake after work on Friday nights, and, for rest of the weekend, we would do what he wanted to do: boating in the summer, or, during the winter—if it was a good one, with plenty of snow and the lake covered in ice—taking the snowmobiles out for a ride.

Still standing and straddling the seat as the water rose over my boots, I lifted my helmet's visor and quickly decided to jump off the snowmobile, not to the left toward shore, but to the right toward the middle of the lake, reasoning that it would be a shorter swim to the edge of the ice than to the shore. Although it was night, the skies were clear, and the moon was bright. Even as panic overtook me—heart racing, quick breathing—and the ice-cold water almost instantly soaked through every layer of my clothing, I still noticed the moon...mainly because the increasing weight of my waterlogged boots and snowmobile suit pulled me down and forced me to look straight up as I tried to paddle my arms in the direction of where I hoped to find the edge of the ice. My helmet, though heavy, was a full-face model, and its chin piece helped keep some of the water out of my mouth while I struggled to stay above the surface. When

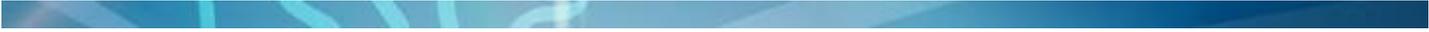
one of my hands finally touched ice, I had probably swum only ten or fifteen feet, but it felt as if I had been swimming for ten or fifteen minutes.

Bringing both of my elbows up onto the ice, I rested for a few seconds and suddenly remembered my dad and the fact that he couldn't swim. Even before pulling myself out of the water, I was already thinking about stripping off the snowmobile gear and going back into the water for my dad. But, when I looked up, I could see his silhouette in the moonlight, as he walked across the ice toward me. Apparently, he had gotten far enough across the open water on his snowmobile that he had been able to jump into the water within reach of the ice's edge. I felt relief for a moment and then remembered that I needed to get out of the cold water. I slowly managed to get one leg up onto the ice, then the other, and, once standing, I felt my dad grasp my still-gloved hand. As the water on the outside of our snowmobile suits quickly froze, we didn't talk but looked toward the shore, searching for and finding a cottage that had its lights on.

It was not quite twenty years before the night of the snowmobile accident that my mother had sought refuge at my grandparents' house at Indian Lake. She had been visiting the lake with them on weekends since she was four years old, but, in the early 1970s, my grandparents had finally bought the lake cottage and moved away from Springfield. When she came to my grandparents' house that time during the fall of 1976, she had me with her and was running away from my dad. Earlier that day, she had told him that she was expecting my sister, they had fought, and he had broken her nose. She stayed with my grandparents nearly a week but then returned home to my father, mainly because, as she recently told me, she was afraid of what could happen if she were on her own with me and my sister, and of the longer-term effects it might have on us not having my dad around at such a young age.

I didn't even know that my dad had done that to my mom until a few years ago—more than a decade after their divorce—and when I confronted him about it, he denied it. I also know now that my mom kept the fact from my sister and me for so long because she didn't want us to hate or lose our relationship with my dad. But it did not seem all that surprising, either, because my sister and I both remember well how much more often we saw and heard our parents arguing and yelling than being joyful or affectionate with each other. For a long time, I had attributed the lack of affection or direct talk about feelings as inherent to a stereotypical White, Midwestern family culture—I failed to notice how my grandparents *were* affectionate with each other, or how some of my cousins were more playful with their parents—and I didn't think that it mattered much anyway because both of my parents had regularly told my sister and me, “I love you.”

Regarding ideas of what it means to be “masculine,” learning that my father was not only verbally and emotionally abusive but also a physical abuser shook my understanding of a lot of what was happening in our family as I was growing up and what I was learning about “being a man.” One of the qualities that my dad was most explicit about was having a strong work ethic and being a provider, and I think that it was this



value that both kept him going back every day to a job that he hated, and gave him (in his view) the authority to make most of the decisions about our family. It also fueled my dad's judgmental and unforgiving attitude toward other men—even those to whom he may have been close at one time—who he thought had failed to support their own families, even while he ignored, of course, the ways that he was so often absent in our lives.

The most frequent target of my dad's scorn was his own father, a Navy veteran who had also worked for many years in a factory. My dad seemed to enjoy retelling the story of how my grandpa had gone bankrupt, how my dad and his siblings had had to stand by and watch as all the family's belongings were repossessed, and how they had had to move to a poorer neighborhood in town, where my dad was bullied after school by groups of Black kids. My dad blamed my grandpa for being weak—although they had been bankrupted because they had co-signed a loan for grandpa's sister-in-law, which she defaulted on—and for letting himself be bossed around by my grandma. My dad never forgave him, nor did he even attend my grandpa's funeral.

Years later—and, unfortunately, too late for me to talk about it with my grandpa himself—I learned from my mom that my grandpa (or “Slim,” as most people had called him) had had to take care of his own mom and sisters when he was just a teen after his father had walked out on them. What's more, when my dad was a boy, Slim's father contacted him out of the blue and told him that he was terminally ill. My grandpa drove across several states and brought his father back to Ohio where he could get better medical treatment before he died. This was, of course, another reason he was so disliked by my father, who couldn't fathom why anyone would forgive—let alone go so far out of their way to help—a parent who had once abandoned them.

Becoming more aware of the fissures in my dad's stories about his (and our) life has also disrupted my understanding of working-class masculinities more broadly. Despite their strengths, many studies of working-class men and masculinities position the shop floor or the all-male peer group as the primary space for defining and normalizing dominant masculinities. One problem with this tendency is that it fails to address the ways that those spaces are built upon privilege and exclusion. For example, I had known for a long time that my dad had gotten some help getting the job at International Harvester—given his prior checkered work history—and I had believed it was my grandfather who was already working there who had recommended my dad for the job. However, it was only in the process of working on this paper and from a conversation with my mom that I learned that it was my grandpa's younger *sister*, who worked in the front office, who had helped bring my dad's *and* my grandpa's applications to the manager's attention, when there were hundreds of people—and not all of them white—applying for those well-paying, union jobs. Similarly, centering the shop floor or all-male peer group as the space where masculinities are made is problematic because it diminishes the role of the household in sustaining (or challenging) them. My own dad, obviously, couldn't have gone to the bars or gone hunting so often with his friends had my mom not been doing most of the work to raise my sister and me and to cook and take care of the house—and then, once we'd started school, gone back to teaching full-time again. Nor could he have sustained whatever frail sense he had of his manhood had he not been so controlling and abusive toward my mom—and, later, my sister.

But, besides coming to new understandings about what was going on in my family during my childhood and about what others' writing about men and masculinities seems to get right or not, I have been most challenged in this project by having to face myself, especially those values or beliefs in which I see some shadows of my father. One is the belief that I have had for most of my life that I have been more strongly influenced in my intellectual interests and pursuits by my dad, who, more than a lot of the other men I knew growing up, spent a lot of time reading and talking about history, politics, and philosophy. In contrast, even though I knew that my mom had gone much further than my dad in her formal education—she was the first

in her family to go to college and the first to earn a graduate degree—I have usually thought of my mom as less “intellectual” than my dad. As dismissive as my father was about engineers who came into the shop with all their “credit hours and credentials,” I don’t think he ever really respected what my mother accomplished with her education—and, admittedly, maybe I haven’t, either.

If I view my own education more through the lens of my mom’s influence, there’s little doubt about who contributed more to my development. From reading to and with me and my sister before we started school, to getting us involved with and transporting us to extracurricular activities, to filling bags with used books at garage sales, to navigating all the paperwork and processes of getting us into college—not to mention doing nearly all the cooking for us and getting us into and out of bed every day—the thousands of hours speak for themselves. What difference would my dad’s “intellectual” disposition have made, had my mom not done nearly all of the work that made it possible for me and my sister to be successful in school and to become pretty well-rounded, responsible adults? What does my holding up my father as my model for learning for so long say about how masculine domination plays out not only in the division of household labor, but also in the deeply held (and gendered) assumptions about what constitutes “real” intelligence or knowledge?

To be clear, I don’t want to belittle my dad in this paper. The main reason that I chose to revisit the snowmobile accident wasn’t the “story” of the accident itself but the moment when he took my hand, which was one of very few memories I have of a genuine connection with him. My mom told me later that, after the accident, he didn’t talk about it very often but that he would occasionally mention the terror (and powerlessness) that he felt in the moment when he thought I was gone. We even managed to talk over the phone regularly for years, even after the divorce, and I think we both got some enjoyment out of discussing politics, or college football, or movies that we’d watched. But we stopped talking 2½ years ago, after I asked him about the time he broke my mom’s nose and he said some things that I’m not quite ready to forgive.

As I said at the start of this paper, my real goals in approaching the project in this way were to better understand my own identity formation, particularly with regard to ideas of “masculinity” or “being a man,” and to use that understanding to become both a better youth worker and a better person for myself and those people who are closest to me now. Regarding my work with youth, I feel more confident now that I see more clearly how things like absence, mental illness, addiction, and domestic violence have been as much a part of my life as they are of the lives of some of the young people with whom I work. I can also see how many of the young people I know have healthier and more open relationships with a lot of their peers than I experienced with my own peers—and I am getting better at understanding and accepting my own social awkwardness and mistakes not as immutable characteristics but as effects (largely) of what my dad did to me and my family. Finally, this project has affirmed some of what I already knew as an organizer—that, especially for those who have benefitted from forms of privilege—critical, reflective work is ongoing and necessary, if dominant structures and institutions of heteropatriarchy, White supremacy, and capitalism are ever to be dismantled. But it has also forced me to be more open and transparent with others about that self-work and has given me motivation to continue writing—maybe even a book?—on this particular topic as it relates to my own stories, so many of which I have left out but that carry meaning for the broader analysis.

A few days after the accident, we learned that the water in front of the Turkey Foot Island condos was open because the owners had installed an aerator to keep water from freezing around their dock posts. Also, in the daytime, other snowmobilers had been running full-throttle across the open water—which was why my dad and I had seen and

followed tracks all the way to the water's edge. But, for some reason, no cones, straw bales, or any other markers had been placed to alert people to the open water. In the spring, after the ice had thawed, the snowmobiles were hauled out of the lake and scrapped. My dad talked about filing some kind of suit against the condo owners, but nothing ever came of it, as far as I know. He never got on a snowmobile again.

About ten years ago, my mom and sister came to visit me in Minnesota over the holidays, and we drove north to spend a few days in Grand Marais. One day, we rented three snowmobiles and took them out on the Gunflint Trail. As the sun started to go down, my sister and I realized that, with my mom riding more slowly, it was going to be dark before we got back to the start of the trail...unless we took a shortcut across the full five-mile length of Devil Track Lake. It was early winter and the temperatures had been fairly mild, but we could see others' tracks running across the lake. I told my mom that I was concerned about how thick the ice on the lake was but that I was more concerned about being stuck out on a long, unfamiliar trail at night and not being able to see the trail markers. Somehow we convinced my mom to agree to the shortcut, but, before we started up the snowmobiles again, I reiterated, "Push the throttle all the way down and don't let go until we're at the other side!" As we took off across the lake, my snowmobile's more powerful engine pulled me out ahead of my mom and sister, but I kept looking at my rearview to check that my mom was staying alongside my sister. Looking up again, I kept my focus on the tracks in front of me, holding my breath just a few times when the snowmobile dipped into some slushy spots...

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