Autoethnographic Literary Nonfiction: Cooking with Cannabis

Description

The AutoEthnographer

> When I return to Samâ??s place with the cheesecloth, I smell our â??soupâ?• pot. *Shit.* I envision the blotter headline: *ECU Professor busted for marijuana*. What a way to make my graduate mentors proud and to show success at this professor business.

Get a big pot.

Somehow the lack of direct, precise directions is right. The South is more like a qualitative word problem than a quadratic equation. You have to pay attention to the subtle clues more than any verbalness; a lesson I had forgotten after six years of graduate school at Penn State. This past year wilted my bravado about being a cultural insider, because my experience growing up in suburban Atlanta did not translate into mastery of southern culture. It took me a week into my first tenure-track position that I started ABD (all but dissertation) to realize that I had been insulted trying to get my East Carolina University faculty ID card. â??Bless your heart,â?• she said. This was code for *good luck getting your ID because youâ??ve been a pain in my ass*. I had asked the secretary to hurry, because I needed the ID to show I was not a graduate student anymore. Everything in eastern North Carolina is coated in a layer of sticky syrup that undercoats fast talk and clear rules. My South is not *this* South. I am not a good white southern girl. I talk too fast, say what I mean, curse like a New Yorker, sleep with a woman, ogle men in church with my gay male friends, and get paid by a public university to research and write about female sexuality as an out feminist.

I find the Revere Ware stock pot in my roach-infested kitchen to haul over to Samâ??s apartment on the other side of the complex. I walk across the crisp beige grass with my big pot, grateful that I have Sam, one of my only two friends in Greenville.

We will make the pot butter there, since Iâ??ve finally admitted to myself that the shadows scuttling across the countertops when I switch on the lights are roaches. Iâ??ve been keeping my flour in the refrigerator since I moved into my two-story apartment on Cherry Court sight unseen. The roaches are

one more burst bubble in my naive dream of life after graduate school. My unwillingness to concede the series of disappointments that a tenure track position in a South I didnâ??t know and couldnâ??t decode left me unprepared for getting up at 5 am to prepare classes, students who called me Mrs. and not Dr., insisting on bisexuality in a social circle that only sees gay and straight, and a shoddy apartment with an unresponsive landlord.

My girlfriend, KG, who I met on my job interview at East Carolina and quit the Russian scientist for, introduced me to Sam and JD *as family* since I moved without knowing anyone. Family by virtue of being gay. Sheâ??s not even living in Greenville this year because of a visiting professorship in Wisconsin. JD and I share a love of cooking and cruising men. Iâ??ve been trying to convince him that *I am* bisexual and not â??semi-straightâ?• as he dubbed me when we first met. â??I donâ??t believe in bisexuality,â?• he said. â??You are either one or the other.â?• He calls me *Semi* as some kind of bitchy affection, though I think of this nickname as meaning Iâ??m a mediocre gay.

I knock on Samâ??s door and consider that at least my research skills are useful here. This is 2000, a time before Pinterest, Wikipedia, and medical marijuana, so finding a recipe for cannabis butter was not easy. When Sam asked me to make pot brownies for his graduation, since Iâ??m a baker who enjoys a challenge, I found three recipes, more or less, online to adapt.

I am exhausted, and I am done. And in an uncharacteristic move, I will leave. I told my department chair last week that I quit. I have not told my parents, because they taught me not to quit things. Perseverance and white stoicism are family values but being here has broken who I thought I was, and who I want to be. Iâ??m going back to Penn State in August to be a post-doc. I will move back into my former apartment with my former roommate, and not be an assistant professor. KG is selling her condo and moving to another state, so we wonâ??t be in the same place anyway. Sam is graduating and moving. There is nothing to moor me to this place.

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Put a lot of water in it.

Yes, this makes sense after Hurricane Floyd.

Floyd hit Cape Fear, North Carolina at 2:30 am on September 16th, 1999. My goal of finishing my dissertation before I turned 28 and Y2K wiped out civilization, almost drowned in flood water inside a FEDEX truck. The pages of my dissertation with my advisorâ??s purple pen marks rode around in the back of a truck on an infinite loop past rotting animal carcasses bloated on the side of the road, past the flooded-out FedEx station at the Greenville airport, past my studentâ??s waterlogged apartments and condemned buildings marked with florescent orange Xâ??s, never making it to my mailbox.

I only tell graduate students the story years later when I am tenured, because it seems like hyperbole: the paper copy of my dissertation riding around in a truck while I waited. The university was closed for two weeks, while we waited to see what would become of the university and our semester. Students used boats to get to their belongings, books bathed in submerged cars on streets turned into rivers. Completing my dissertation almost washed out by this natural disaster dubbed the hurricane of the century, the 500-year flood, and the single greatest disaster in North Carolinaâ??s history. I usually leave out the part about learning to make pot brownies, and how I drove through flood water to get to the airport and my girlfriendâ??s apartment in Wisconsin during the power and water outages, but especially the part about the crushing disappointment that there is no such thing as utopia after finishing the dissertation.

> Floyd whipped seventeen inches of rain against the roof and windows of my crappy apartment, as I sat by my filled bathtub, alone, not sleeping, wondering if the place would stay standing. The wind seemed like a furious drunk ready to extract retribution for all of my Yankee feminist sins.

The AutoEthnographer

The lights flicker in my office that was once a dorm room as I type changes into the final chapter of my dissertation willing the power to stay on. *Please, please, please*. The university closed at noon, so everyone could stop by *Piggly Wiggly* for hurricane suppliesâ??beer, toilet paper, and breadâ??but here I am working while branches scrape my office window, the lights cut in and out, and the wind and rain beat in time to my panic. I have to send the changes to my advisor by 5 pm, as she needs two weeks with every draft. I have scheduled in no time for disasters, natural or of my own making, so I do not even stop to pee in my private bathroom. At first, I thought this office was special; a big wooden window, the bathroom with a toilet and bathtub rigged into a bookshelf with a piece of plywood. But the night I spent in the office writing another chapter of the dissertation when the rat ran over my prone body during a power nap was the first sign that this move had been a mistake. The other sign is when I hit send at 4:59 pm and have to drive around downed trees on campus, each path cut off until I use the furthest exit. I have no idea what I am supposed to do to prepare for this hurricane, so I stop by the store on the way to my apartment. *Hurricane Floyd is coming*. I read the handwritten sign on poster board taped to a window on my way in to find empty store shelves.

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Sam called me in the morning. â??Are you okay?â?•

â??I didnâ??t know what to do, so I filled my bathtub with water. I have never lived anywhere with hurricanes, and there was no beer or gallons of water at Piggly Wiggly last night. At least the power is still on. And there are no leaks inside. Thank you. Oh, and I sent my dissertation changes to my advisor!â?• I felt less alone as I pictured Sam across the way, the native North Carolinian, who had taught me about class and friendship these past months. Sam will graduate with a music degree, and he sings opera so well he could make your uncle cry. Before that, he got certified to fix HVAC. â??Because you never know,â?• he told me. Some people do not have safety nets. When the landlord wouldnâ??t fix the AC unit in my apartment, Sam did. For weeks, I had watched the circle of water grow

on the ceiling of my living room like a spider web and waited for it to collapse in relief on the bottom floor of the apartment.

Sam opens the door to his apartment, and I enter the narrow dark kitchen by the entrance with a pound of butter and my big stock pot. â??Hey Sam! Ready?â?• I asked.

Throw in your shake.

Sam bought a quarter a bag for me to turn into weed butter. I am not going to throw in shakeâ??the small pieces of cannabis flower that break off of larger budsâ??because we donâ??t have any. Only those who use regularly have *shake*, like the stoner who posted this imprecise recipe I will try and follow. Sam told me that heroin had been his drug of choice earlier, and that is why he worked at Waffle Houseâ??you could be high at work. I still marvel that he just quit doing drugs, especially when he describes the ecstatic high of heroin. *Does one really just quit?* The mention of *shake* in this non-recipe flashes me back to living with Rain and her skanky boyfriend the summer of *not writing* my dissertation. They smoked so much pot that they wheezed up the two flights of stairs in our duplex, their stems and buds strewn on our coffee table, their pinch hitter often nestled into the cracks of the couch cushions. Not only could I not invite friends over to the apartment, but I also worried about my culpability. I lied to myself that they were doing heroin, too, until they moved out, and I called the landlord to have the locks changed.

The Autoethnographer

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I was anti-drug until my senior year in college when my friends bought me a quarter bag of pot; caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol were my vices of choice. My paranoia about getting kicked out of school found me hiding that bag in the tampon box; a case where hatred of vaginas worked to my advantage. *Who would look in there?* The soccer players who lived in the house near my apartment got busted for pot and kicked out of school. This is why all of my international friends used my apartment to get high, and I insisted they at least put a towel under the door to contain the wafts of smoke.

â??Sam, where is the stuff?â?• I asked. I have no idea where Sam stashed the weed, but I know it isnâ??t a tampon box. Since I came out as a feminist at 19, Iâ??ve had to defend vaginas. Dating KG and openly sleeping with a woman means that I have more explicit conversations about my love for women *and* vaginas, something I didnâ??t do when I was a straight woman. Sam, thankfully, is a gay man who does not hate women.

JD talks about his antipathy toward vaginas when we cruise men, and I point out his misogyny while we drink glass after glass of red wine. If I am really drunk, I will make him listen as I describe the art of fisting, especially if he grunts out repulsed sounds. I am not sure why I hang out with JD, because I have been purging toxic masculinity out of my social circle.

â??Hey, semi! Check him out!â?• JD and I are sharing a bottle of Lindemans Cabernet/Merlot bin 52. Even the wine is not a straight varietal. We are eating our usual Caesar salad with blue cheese, lemon

wedges wrapped in cheesecloth to squeeze on top, and drinking a bottle of wine while we cruise men at the overpriced bougie restaurant. Some people use God the way I use a glass of Cabernet. JD and I go to brunch after the Episcopal church services on Sunday and often get dinner on Friday night, too. I am not Episcopal and have been straying away from my Baptist upbringing. *There probably isnâ??t a God, and certainly not a male God*. I often think to myself, but I do appreciate the ritual and the sense of community. Sam usually sings in the choir. JD and I, and his other gay male friends sit in the pew closest to the weekly communion as this is the best spot to check out menâ??s asses. It is also the best place for men to overhear us should the need arise. Of course, I think that these men with whom I share an appreciation of male bodies with would love my crude talk and cock salt and pepper shakers when I invite them to my place for brunch one Sunday. No, they will not use them. Most of them will not even touch the Delft Blue porcelain penises that I picked up in Amsterdam years before.

I would not finish my dissertation.

I would not keep my job.

Four years of suffering in a PhD program washed out.

I am not a real lesbian.

I am not a true scholar.

I am a disappointment.

I cannot drive back to Greenville.

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Add some butter.

â??I guess that a pound of butter for a quarter bag is about right. How much water should we add?â?• I asked Sam. He shrugs, and I translate *a lot of water* into about 2 liters. I am nervous when I throw four sticks of unsalted butter into the pot and pour water in until it looks right.

Most weekends, I am at JDâ??s house with my Food and Wine tested recipes as we drink and cook. JD cooked out of the October issue for me the weekend I had to stay up for two days to finish the final edits of the dissertation, because my advisorâ??s comments on the manuscript rode around in that fucking Fed Ex truck for two weeks. The Greenville Fed Ex station was under water. I called the office and begged them to leave it in the closet office, which was Rocky Mount, a one and a half hour drive each way. I shudder to remember how when I reached the office, the worker told me that it wasnâ??t there. I could not speak. I could not move. I must have uttered a non-human cry, because he went back into the mail room for 20 minutes to triple check. I considered how much wine I would need to drown out this pain.

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I jumped up in the air when he returned with the package in his hands, tears in my usually dry eyes. So what that I had 48 hours to turn this manuscript around.

Boil.

â??I forgot the cheesecloth.â?• I said. â??I will run to my apartment and be right back. Watch the pot, okay?â?•

The Autoethnographer

The air is as thick as an affair when I run across the burnt lawn back to my apartment. I grew up in Suburban Atlanta, but Iâ??ve spent my 20â??s up North. The humidity wilts my will on a daily basis. Getting the cheesecloth was such a production that Iâ??m irritated I forgot it. Piggly Wiggly did not have any cheesecloth, so the store manager suggested I try the auto-parts store. People use cheesecloth to wax their cars. When I entered the store, I must have been jittery.

â??What are you using this for?â?• The store clerk asked.

WHAT? Why must I make conversation in these mundane interactions. Do I not look like someone who wants to wax their car? I search my bankrupt catalog of appropriate responses. â??Uh, soup. I am making vegetable soup.â?• I said. I hope that my answer does not sound as stupid as I think it does. *Who goes to an auto-parts store and buys cheesecloth to make soup?*

> I am relieved when I smell other sage-sweet aromas and see the tell-tell signs of pot smoke wafting from under the neighborâ??s doors. It seems that this part of the apartment complex knows how to relax.

Squeeze the water out of the butter.

When I return to Samâ??s place with the cheesecloth, I smell our â??soupâ?• pot. *Shit.* I envision the blotter headline: *ECU Professor busted for marijuana*. What a way to make my graduate mentors proud and to show success at this professor business. This is also a time before the show *Weeds* with the white suburban mother who deals pot. I wonder if any of my students would be surprised. I have been so careful with my pronoun usage so that students canâ??t accuse me of being biased when I talk about sexual issues that I am not sure who I am when I teach class anyway. I am relieved when I smell other sage-sweet aromas and see the tell-tell signs of pot smoke wafting from under the neighborâ??s doors. It seems that this part of the apartment complex knows how to relax.

â??How do I do this?â?• I ask. I donâ??t know whether to drain the water out of the pot, and then use the cloth. Or maybe I need to let it cool down, and then strain it. I let my cooking instincts take over and produce the most beautiful early spring green cannabis butter. I may be an incompetent North Carolinian, but damn if Iâ??m not an intuitive and fabulous cook.

I make two pans of brownies with the butter to take to Samâ??s and my going away party at KGâ??s duplex. We put them in a cabinet away from the non-special brownies we also serve.

I like to put a pat on my morning toast.

I laugh when I read that part of the recipe envisioning what being stoned before the day began would be like. Perhaps better than my usual coffee buzz. And then I eat one brownie before the party begins, because I do not want to be sober.

I donâ??t feel any different.

â??Should I eat another one?â?• I asked Sam.

â??I ate two.â?• He said.

The AutoEthnographer

> A true nerd, words and empathic men make me hot. Throw in a little badness and an accentâ??his voice is like sweet tea spiked with Tennessee whiskyâ??and I let my hedonistic side out.

After the second brownie, I still donâ??t feel like someone else until the moment the psychology professorâ??my department chairâ??arrives. I go from stone sober to high as I need to openly flirt with him in my girlfriendâ??s condo at my going away party. Iâ??ve been having sexual fantasies about him for months and assumed it was because of the conversations we had about riding motorcycles, academia, and what it meant to be an intellectual. A true nerd, words and empathic men make me hot. Throw in a little badness and an accentâ??his voice is like sweet tea spiked with Tennessee whiskyâ??and I let my hedonistic side out.

I would sit in the chair beside his desk, and we would talk. He told me about wearing full leather to ride his motorcycle, just in case. And I pretended like this was innocent mentoring, though I suspect, looking back, I could have taken my fantasies out of the abstract and made them concrete. That chair was like a confessional; one afternoon after I found out my younger brotherâ??s best friend killed himself in his bedroom with a gun in his motherâ??s house, I cried in that chair, in a maleâ??s office, at work, the place I wanted to be seen as professional, unemotional and unmovable like a brick wall. This was only the second time I cried in a manâ??s officeâ??the first being my professorâ??s office in the chair beside his desk as a masterâ??s student when my grandfather died. I was angry at myself both times, mortified to cry in front of authority figures, especially male ones.

Fuck it. *Fuck this place*. I am about to leave this town, and I donâ??t have to pretend to be anything others want me to be or fall into a lesbian look as KG claims I will or be either gay or straight as JD demands or any of the other *shoulds* this place requires. Later that night, when I am too high to care, I give in to the giggles. KGâ??s air conditioner had broken in the middle of the party, in the middle of

southern August heat, and because we were both moving, there were no sheets to fit the bed. I lay down on the bare mattress stripped of sheets, frame, and a box spring, but she stops me. Out of the top of a box marked bedroom, she finds flannel sheets. I canâ??t stop laughing or sweating. I know she wants me to shut up. I keep laughing.

Like flannel sheets in August heat, I understand now that the gendered South had been coiled around my neck like a coiffed Beehive. Not even JDâ??s parting words loosen the grip.

â??You know what, Semi? I believe you are bisexual.â• He said to me in the parking lot of my misery. I pulled the U-Haul out of the apartment complex without waving back. I only let out my breath when I crossed the Pennsylvania state line.

AUTHORâ??S MEMO

In this autoethnography, I use the recipe form as personal essay to explore disappointment, identity negotiation, and sexual desire during transition, specifically the transition from graduate student to assistant professor and the ensuing identity shifts that occur with major life changes. I wrote this piece about graduating with my PhD, moving to the South after breaking up with a long-term partner, experiencing a natural disaster that almost ruined my dissertation, dating a woman for the first time, substance use, emerging bisexual identity, and my assumptions about southern culture that prevented me from fitting in a place and mindset I didnâ??t understand. This experience taught me an important lesson as a feminist ethnographerâ??arrogance and assuming that labels are accurate representations of culture and behavior are antithetical to good fieldwork.

by Sandra L. Faulkner

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