

Balancing Act

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abstract

This short play is an autoethnography written as part of the coursework for the class *Between Literature and (Auto)ethnography*, which I took as an Erasmus exchange student at the University of Wrocław. Through this play, I aim to explore the evolving relationship between queerness and identity, particularly as it shifts from adolescence to adulthood. Autoethnography can connect personal experience to a larger cultural and political framework. What distinguishes autoethnographic research from other types of research is that the researcher is also one of the research subjects and inserts themselves into the research process. Following Carolyn Ellis's method of interactive interviewing, I spoke with four queer friends of mine about their understanding of queerness and identity, with a focus on their coming-of-age experiences. The most unifying theme across these conversations was that queerness is in constant transformation, and the relationship between one's queerness and one's identity is perpetually challenged. This play speaks only for five people—no more, no less. It offers a small window into a multitude of queer lives, but it does not claim to represent any broader community, as it is a highly personal account. Thus, it is not generalizable, and many significant issues within the queer community remain unaddressed. Each character is a fusion of multiple people, and while the conflict in the play is fictional, the opinions expressed are real. They emerged from and were discussed during the interviews.

keywords

community, identity, coming of age, autoethnography

A small living room. It's dark outside and the November rain splatters against the windows. It could be afternoon or midnight. Darkness has taken away any sense of time. JOSIE is lying on the carpet and looking through an abundance of printed photos. MARVIN is sitting at the table and carefully cutting colourful paper. In the background Chappell Roan's "Pink Pony Club"¹ is playing. During the chorus MARVIN gets up and performs with gay abandon, using the scissors as a microphone. JOSIE continues looking through the photos but mouths the lyrics to herself. The song fades out as the characters begin to speak.

MARVIN: I hope Ida remembers the glue sticks.

JOSIE (pulls out her phone to check the time): And the chocolate. Do you want more tea?

She gets up to fetch some without waiting for MARVIN'S answer. In that moment the bell rings.

MARVIN: I got it, you go and get more tea.

MARVIN *opens the front door and lets in IDA, who is drenched with rain.*

IDA: Hey Marvin, I'm so sorry I'm late. Take this.

She hands him a huge plastic bag.

IDA: I forgot the glue sticks, so I had to go back and then I missed my bus and had to walk and –

MARVIN: Well, that's homophobic. Come on in.

They sit down on the carpet and JOSIE joins them with the tea.

JOSIE: Hey! Thanks for bringing more craft stuff.

MARVIN: You even brought glitter how cool! *(He rummages through the plastic bag)*
And stickers, nice!

He finds the chocolate, breaks off a piece and shares with the others.

IDA: I just took everything that screamed "Pia" to me. Everything loud, glittery, colourful.

JOSIE: Makes sense.

Everyone grabs some craft supplies and starts crafting.

IDA: You guys printed a lot of photos. Oh, look at you, Josie, you and Pia, you were such baby gays! But how's all that going to fit into one photo album?

As IDA mentions "Baby Gay" another presence, BABY GAY, comes up from behind the sofa and leans against the closet. They look around the room curiously. Nobody takes notice of BABY GAY.

JOSIE: It has to fit somehow. Here, your cup, careful not to spill anything.

IDA: Oh, actually, I have some tea to spill.

MARVIN: Tell us!!

IDA: So, while I was on my way here Pia facetimed me. Don't worry, I came up with a lie, she would *never* suspect me to be on my way to meet up with you to make her birthday gift. Anyway – guess what she did?

JOSIE: Bleached her eyebrows?

MARVIN: Second nose piercing?

JOSIE: Joined a commune?

IDA: Valid, but no. She was on her way to the hairdresser. She said she would let them cut it short.

JOSIE: Like *short short*? As in my grandma would say “are you trying to be a boy”?

IDA: I think so.

MARVIN (*jokingly*): Well, now *all* the photos are going to be outdated, ugh.

JOSIE (*pensively*): Hm.

IDA: What is it, Josie?

BABY GAY *sits down on the sofa and listens attentively.*

JOSIE: I’m not a fan of this.

MARVIN *and IDA look at her in confusion.*

IDA: What? But why?

JOSIE: It just feels wrong.

MARVIN: What do you mean? How can a haircut be wrong? (*He pauses for a moment*) How can self-expression be wrong?

JOSIE: I don’t believe that this is honest self-expression. I think she did it, because she wants to appear more queer.

MARVIN: And what if? You have short hair yourself Josie, what’s the big deal?

JOSIE: I don’t have short hair, because I’m a lesbian.

MARVIN: Oh, come on, not even a little bit?

JOSIE and BABY GAY: When I realized I’m queer, I thought I had to cut off my hair.

JOSIE: But I didn’t do it back then. So, no, I don’t have short hair because I’m a lesbian. It’s just *me*.

IDA: Is that not the same –

JOSIE: Look, I’ve known Pia way longer than you both have. I don’t think it’s *her*.

MARVIN: You can’t have a monopoly on short hair.

JOSIE: That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just all the sudden changes recently. First the nose piercing, then she changed her whole wardrobe and started taking queer pottery classes, whatever that is. And she always told me how much she liked her long hair. I feel like she changed, because she felt pressured to fit in. As if there was no space for her the way she used to be.

MARVIN: That's nonsense. Queerness is about *not* fitting in. That's like the definition of being queer. And change is also about embracing not fitting in. And trying out different things and seeing what sticks.

MARVIN and BABY GAY: And if I think back, I've changed in ridiculous ways, I've expressed myself in ridiculous ways. Fashion and interests were dictated by my queerness.

MARVIN: A lot of this is not me anymore.

IDA: And is that not simply a part of becoming yourself? Allowing yourself space to go through changes?

JOSIE: It is. But why does it have to be *stereotypical* changes? This is not genuine.

IDA: But, Josie, look at this photo. You still had long hair, sure, but what's up with this flannel over tank-top combo paired with a cap? If that's not a stereotypical 2016 lesbian, I don't know what is.

MARVIN: Seems as if you are not as immune to outward influences and stereotypes as you thought, Josie.

JOSIE (*blushing*): That was my baby gay phase when I was 14! That's different! I didn't know anything! I had to figure it out all by myself.

BABY GAY (*upset*): Why are you so mean to me?

JOSIE is taken aback and looks around as if she heard something. Then she shakes her head and tries to let go of the feeling.

IDA: Are you alright, Josie?

JOSIE (*hesitantly*): Yeah...I just remembered how –

JOSIE and BABY GAY: I relied on YouTube to tell how to be a proper lesbian.²

IDA and BABY GAY: Relatable! I took so many tests on the internet to find out if I'm a lesbian or bisexual.³

JOSIE: Oh yes, I forgot about that! The test questions were always so terribly obvious and unhelpful.

JOSIE, IDA and BABY GAY all chuckle.

MARVIN and BABY GAY: Hm, I never did that.

IDA: Why? How were you so sure about how to be queer and we were not?

MARVIN and BABY GAY: I think I didn't have to rely on the internet, but I was still insecure at times. The beginning was lonely. But then I opened up to my queer friends. I had a little community, even then, unlike you guys. I think this

made a difference. Because of them, queerness was always an option for me, always present in my life as something beautiful.

IDA and BABY GAY: I always longed for a queer friend group when I was younger.

JOSIE: How did your friends react to your coming out?

MARVIN: They said, "Oh, we thought you already knew that about yourself. We did". Much like we reacted to Pia coming out to us last year.

IDA: I think we were more respectful. I mean sure, we assumed she might be queer, but we didn't say it to *her*.

MARVIN: I wouldn't be so sure about that...

JOSIE: But see, about knowing how to be queer, this is what I mean. Pia doesn't have to jump on every queer TikTok trend to figure herself out! She has us to see how diverse queerness can be. She is not alone.

MARVIN and BABY GAY: You didn't listen, Josie. I still tried all sorts of different stereotypical things. Everyone in my friend group did. At times I copied them. Oh, and there was I bunch of labels I went through before I settled on queer.

JOSIE and BABY GAY: Oh, I remember, I also went through so many labels!

JOSIE: Actually, I thought way too much about it. But that's teenage behaviour, nothing more. All teenagers are trying to pigeonhole themselves. But now we're adults. We don't need to microlabel ourselves this way anymore.

MARVIN: I agree. My sexuality is fluid. Queer is enough. Sometimes even too much.

IDA: I agree. Wait. I don't. This is getting complicated. (*She thinks for a moment*) The label bisexual is important to me. And Josie don't be a hypocrite, you mostly refer to yourself as lesbian or gay, not as queer when we talk about it. That's not incidental.

MARVIN: Why does it matter? It's silly how you cling to this label. Queer is an umbrella term.

IDA: But it matters who stands under the umbrella. It matters to me who I am.

JOSIE: It's just easier to introduce myself as queer or gay to strangers. They don't need to know more about me. But you are right, Ida, when I feel comfortable like I do with you both, I do emphasize the lesbian in me. I used to believe that you can lump all queer people and all queer issues together, but that's impossible. My position in society differs from yours and by embracing this label I can accept that and understand myself.

MARVIN: I don't want to claim only a nook in society. I want to wander everywhere.

IDA: I'm not trying to limit your curious mind.

MARVIN: But don't you feel limited by labelling yourself?

IDA: No, because it's me. When I call myself queer, I also label myself. The only difference is, it doesn't feel as right.

JOSIE: It's not limiting, because I also agree that sexuality is fluid. So if I wake up tomorrow yearning for a man, that's okay. But today, right now, I am a lesbian. It's not set in stone. So it can't be limiting.

MARVIN: For me it's not that easy. I couldn't adjust this quickly.

IDA: What do you mean?

MARVIN and BABY GAY: I used to think I'm a gay man for a couple years now. I was so incredibly convinced that I'm only attracted to other men.

MARVIN: The other day I went to a bar and I met a woman and I felt such an intense energy between us. We flirted a lot and at some point we started making out and I was like, oh my God, okay, what's happening? I got a surge of gay panic-

JOSIE (*jokingly*): Noo, that was straight panic! A straight awakening!

IDA: So you were just like, hang on, this doesn't fit with my self-image?

MARVIN: Yeah, totally, I was like, who am I to be doing this right now?

JOSIE: What happened then?

MARVIN (*blushing*): Well, I -, I told her I'm tired and have to go home. I didn't know how to deal with this situation.

IDA and JOSIE *shake their head in disbelief*.

JOSIE: So you think you missed out on interesting people because of your label?

MARVIN: Yes, I had the inner urge to adhere to the label I had given myself. And by refusing to do that, by refusing to categorize what I feel, I can feel more. The label queer is only useful or necessary to me when I try to communicate that I'm not straight, because that is essentially what I would like others to know.

JOSIE: That was probably another reason for my wild style choices back in 2016.

JOSIE and BABY GAY: I thought if other queer people can tell, I won't be as alone.

JOSIE: As if a queer community would spawn out of nothing.

IDA: I mean, I still wear a pin on my jacket. I am seen by others, but others are also seen by me. That's not exactly a real community, more like a little safe space. Although I've noticed, since I've been with Elias, when we go out together, people tend to assume I'm only a straight ally.

MARVIN: Does it bother you?

IDA: Sometimes it does. My bisexuality doesn't leave me when I'm in a straight relationship, even though it might appear this way to some. Just yesterday, Elias and I were trying to decide where to go on holiday. We could go anywhere as a straight couple, but I realized I don't want to go to a country where my identity is illegal.

JOSIE: Queerness is nothing that we can simply take off when we don't feel like carrying it around that day.

IDA: Yes, exactly and it changes social dynamics in every interaction I have, even if the other person is not aware. And in most situations I like to be seen as who I am.

MARVIN: You mean you like to express and highlight that you are bisexual?

IDA: No, I just want to exist as myself. There is no nameable expressivity connected to that.

JOSIE: I am also annoyed when people act like I'm making some huge statement when I walk hand in hand with another woman. It is not a testimony, it's just me living my everyday life. It's other people that see it as a statement.

MARVIN: Yes, I get that. It's exhausting. Even if I don't come out actively, my existence is a passive coming out that I never intended to be there. I never wanted to come out. I never felt the need to do so. Other people demanded it from me. My queerness has always been there. It didn't come out of me on a random Tuesday.

They all nod in unison quietly. Everyone is lost in their thoughts while they keep crafting Pia's photo album. BABY GAY yawns and takes a little nap on the sofa. BABY GAY sleeps on peacefully when JOSIE breaks the silence after a while.

JOSIE: It's a two-edged sword, isn't it?

IDA: What is?

JOSIE: Being queer. Walking the line between queerness and myself, merging these parts into one. Wanting to be visibly queer, expressing my queerness, participating in queerness and its revolutionary potential on the one hand, whereas on the other hand blending it in, integrating queerness into myself as something less exciting than my favourite colour.

MARVIN: I'm not sure I follow you.

JOSIE (*sighs*): Sometimes it's so demanding, it's too much. I get lost between living my life and...uh...

IDA: ...maybe living your life responsibly?

JOSIE: You can certainly put it that way. Why do I have to be responsible for representing queerness though? I never asked for this responsibility.

IDA: If everyone throughout history had thought this way, nothing would've changed. If people hadn't carried the burden of responsibility.

JOSIE: I know that and that's why I feel so bad about it.

MARVIN: Don't you want to fight for queer issues? It's an opportunity!

JOSIE: I do, really. However, not because I'm queer, simply because I'm human. Not only queer people should fight for queer issues. And I don't want to feel ashamed and stressed when I don't go to every single march for queer rights.

IDA: But then you let opportunities for change pass you by. Being queer has such a potential for revolution, it's such an extreme otherness and a rejection of all heteronormativity. It's a chance to change society fundamentally! Why do you want to exist within a society that doesn't favour your existence at all?

MARVIN: Yes, why do you set this minimum of change that is comfortable for you? That's like bending the prison bars a little, but not enough break out.

JOSIE: I'm not sure I reject all heteronormative norms?

IDA: Like what?

JOSIE: Monogamy for example? Is that not a heteronormative norm I adhere to?

IDA: Hm, maybe. But remember, when I opened my relationship, you did reflect on your own monogamy, so it's not thoughtless acceptance of this societal norm. I bet you wouldn't have been as receptive to overthinking this, if you hadn't been queer.

JOSIE: There's no way of knowing...

MARVIN: Fine, I can understand that you are exhausted by all the possibilities for activism. And of course, straight people should engage as well, the same way we should engage for causes that are not connected to our identity. But what about more lowkey acts of defiance like creating safe spaces? For this it's a prerequisite to belong to the marginalized group, isn't it?

JOSIE: I'm on the fence, as I said. I have trouble combining all of those different parts within myself. Because yes, I like when I recognize other queer people on

the street and we shoot each other a knowing smile. I feel safe. I like when I can go to an event and talk about my lesbianism without fear. I wish it was like that everywhere.

IDA: But?

JOSIE: But whenever I'm in such a safe space, I can't shake the notion that it is like a fairytale, not reality, which makes me sad. And quite frankly, I don't really understand the need for queer pottery classes. But above all, I'm often disappointed when I realize that the uniting aspect of being queer doesn't always guarantee deeper understanding or connections between each other.

MARVIN: In my experience queerness can lay the foundation for intimate friendships with mutual understanding. I mean look at us!

JOSIE: We've been literally disagreeing on everything for the past hour?? And honestly, I don't like how my identity is reduced to my sexuality in safe spaces. I am more than that. This is not empowering to me at all.

MARVIN: That's not what I meant to imply.

IDA: Josie, you mentioned fairytales...isn't it also beautiful to have this escape from the real world? Where you can safely learn how to integrate your queerness into your life. Is that not what you are struggling with?

JOSIE: I don't know. Right now I'm just confused.

MARVIN: I like that I can learn how to live as a queer person in such spaces and maybe even see what my future could look like. Especially, if I meet queer people that are older than me. To me, it was hard to imagine what my future can hold in store for me, until I had seen it in a queer space. Of course, I also don't want my identity to be confined to such a safe space. I want to take this naturalness of being myself out into the real world, which is not a queer space. And there I want to take up just as much space.

IDA: You sound so hopeless and hopeful at once. Aren't you both happy to be queer? Don't you see how beautiful it is to be queer and how integral it is to have spaces to celebrate that?

JOSIE: I never said it wasn't beautiful. I just said there are two sides to it. Queerness is so incredibly beautiful and freeing and I didn't intend to overshadow this. My lesbianism has made me regain my freedom. It has made me reconnect to womanhood. To womanhood that is queer and shaped by my queerness. I can bend femininity and masculinity as I please. And it has allowed me to think of myself as beautiful.

IDA: Then I am still confused about your problem with Pia and –

MARVIN (*looking at his phone and shouting*): Guys, it's BeReal time!!

MARVIN *starts taking his BeReal but IDA and JOSIE intervene.*

IDA: No, don't do it!! Or Pia will know we are here! The surprise of the birthday gift will be ruined. Josie, you have to take your BeReal without us so Pia doesn't suspect anything!

JOSIE *starts taking her BeReal.*

MARVIN: Be careful! I think the photo album is in the frame!

JOSIE: I know how to take a photo!

JOSIE *finally takes her BeReal.*

IDA: Let us see!

The three of them huddle together and look through the BeReals on JOSIE'S phone.

MARVIN: Oh look, this is Pia's.

They all look at Pia's BeReal on JOSIE'S phone. Pia is grinning widely into the camera. Her hair is short. Everyone is so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. JOSIE clears her throat, her eyes watering a little.

JOSIE: She... she looks so happy.

BABY GAY *smiles lightly in their sleep.*

THE END

notes

1 <https://tinyurl.com/kn99eep7>

2 <https://tinyurl.com/59arkwkh>

3 Try it yourself: <https://tinyurl.com/muatbbee>