

The Art of Sexting: Queer Theory and Identity Politics

Eric Longfellow

In this article, Longfellow uses queer theory to trace his foray into the genre of sexting. Pulling from antecedent genres such as romance novels, erotica, and film, he sends explicit text messages to his girlfriend and then analyzes both the texts and her responses. All of this is in an effort to subvert traditional understandings of sexuality, power, and identity.

In 2011, Anthony Weiner brought *sexting* back into the forefront of our collective consciousness when he sent a picture of his penis out to the world in a scandal dubbed “Weinergate.” My first thought: *wait a minute, how is that sexting?* After first hearing the term a few years before in countless television shows and news outlets, I had just assumed that the term sexting was held exclusively for the text message equivalent of phone sex. You know, conversations rapt with awkward misspellings of the word ‘come’ and euphemisms like ‘member’ that you have to assume will make anyone involved feel uncomfortable. The idea that sexting could be as simple as snapping a shot of your erection-stretched boxer briefs . . . sign me up.

So I had to do some research. Turns out sexting is a pretty broad term. Wikipedia, my go to source for semi-reliable background knowledge, told me that “Sexting is the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photographs, primarily between mobile phones. The term was first popularized in early 21st century, and is a portmanteau of sex and texting.” Good to know— if I want to delve into the world of sex-based text messaging, it *can* be as easy as dropping trou and snapping off an Instagram. And on a side note, portmanteau already sounds kinky. I’ll spare everyone the details of my

ensuing thought process—suffice it to say that it involved some contemplation of angles and lighting. Ultimately, though, I had to ask myself if I really felt comfortable with the knowledge that that part of me would be out there, floating around in the ether, and worse, that it could conceivably be traced back to me. The James Lipton commercial came to mind where he stops a young man from sending a picture of his “junk” to his girlfriend by giving him his beard, then saying, “before you text, give it a ponder.” Find it on Youtube. Plus, I couldn’t help but be paranoid that we inopportunately named individuals, the Weiners and the Longfellows of the world alike, have a slightly higher chance of something like that coming back to bite us in the ass. Who knows, I might run for Congress someday.

So, I decided not to go ahead with the erotic photography, but not before running some interesting Photoshop background scenarios through my mind. Also, I had to suppress a disturbing curiosity to use the program Oldify. I digress. Long story short: the little amount of research I had done on sexting made me curious enough to learn more about the growing practice. If the picture wasn’t going to work, I would have to resort to good, old-fashioned words. What follows is a step by step breakdown of how I researched and ultimately composed within this somewhat unfamiliar genre that seems to have much of the country up in arms. This article, then, follows a queer theoretical model to explore conceptions of *heteronormativity* and *intersectionality* in an effort to frame the practice of sexting within a socio-cultural and historical context.

Before I begin, it may be beneficial to give some background knowledge on queer theory and the approach to writing I will be taking. Queer, in this instance, refers to anything that works against dominant modes of culture—anything that works against what would be widely considered “normal.” If you think about identitarian politics, or the categories people use to identify themselves—i.e. I’m straight, or I’m white, or I’m middle class—you can start to see how the term queer can disrupt what is generally thought to be “normal” in productive ways. Heteronormativity, then, can be seen as the dominant thinking that heterosexuality and the binary gender differences between men and women are normal, and that anything falling outside of that thinking is deviant. This is a way of thinking that I would like to complicate. In this essay, I begin to do that by looking at the queer concept of intersectionality, which holds that all categories of identity, be they sexual orientation, race, class, gender, etc., are inherently problematic and unstable, and we would do better to look at an individual as inhabiting all the different categories of identity imposed on them. These definitions and examples may be somewhat dense, and, for our purposes, a bit oversimplified, but they can help us to work toward a base of knowledge for understanding how we might queer our writing in interesting and unexpected ways.

Returning to my exploration of sexting, my first thought was where to start? I've been doing research in the field of gender and sexuality studies for years now, but somehow I felt an annotated bibliography with the likes of well-known theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler, while helpful in framing this article, wasn't going to be all that useful for learning about sexting itself. So, being at least proficient with texting, I decided to start with the other side of things—the sex side of things. In dealing with sex, and writing, and what was essentially a modified form of talking dirty, the logical place to turn, for me, was erotica. As luck would have it, there were some old romance novels lying around from a box of books I'd gotten from a friend. After a good six pages, I was ready to go, or so I thought. What follows is my first foray into sexting, sent to my girlfriend, Jess, who, I should add, was at the time unaware of this article and of my newfound research interests.

Eric: My quivering sex longs for you.

Jess: Stop it.

Eric: I'm writing an article on sexting.

Jess: Well don't do it.

By which, I'm pretty sure she meant don't do it as in don't actually sext her and not don't write the article. Gotta break a few eggs if you're trying to make a filthy, inappropriate omelet, though. In fairness, I knew my first attempt was premature, but I wanted to test the waters before attempting anything serious. My thought process was working off a model of experimentation as a productive tool. I knew that even if she was slightly annoyed, or even confused, Jess knew my sense of humor enough that she wouldn't get angry or offended. I also knew that to experiment, and yes to fail, is often not a bad thing when attempting to write in new and unfamiliar genres. I was fine starting at the bottom, and may I say, the Harlequin romance approach to sexting is indeed the bottom. I did learn a couple things in looking back, though. One, personification of genitalia might not translate well through the medium of text messages; and two, sex as a noun should never be used as a euphemism for any body parts. Embrace the failure, I thought. So, I pressed on.

Eric: How moist are you?

Jess: Oh, God.

Eric: Was that last message intended to be in the form of a moan?

Jess: No. No it was not.

I was getting somewhere! Not with Jess, but the notion that sexting might breed a form of miscommunication with which I was unfamiliar was something I hadn't considered. There are probably a lot of dismissive responses to a sext that could be read as encouragement, or at the very least complicity. *Oh, God* was one, but the possibilities started to add up—*Please, Oh yeah?*, *Come on*—really most curt responses could be misread. In order to move to the next level, I would need to broaden my research base.

Jess's response was pretty clearly not one of encouragement, and knowing in advance that she has an aversion to the word *moist*, it wasn't hard to see that coming. But it led me to an interesting conclusion: audience matters. Reception is an important part of any form of communication. Had I not known the person I was sexting as well as I know my girlfriend, the outcome might have been drastically different. And, further, I don't recommend sexting anyone unless you are absolutely certain that they will be okay with it. Thoughtfulness and tact notwithstanding, issues of harassment can be devastating for people, not to mention the legal ramifications involved with sending unwelcome sexts. Knowing my audience, I set out to improve my sexting literacy. But first I needed to expand the playing field. It sounded easy at first. Jess and I have a strong relationship, and I know she wouldn't mind me sexting other people, but that's where it gets complicated. I found myself abound in issues of identity politics. Despite my hopes that we might all someday queer how we think about identity, I am widely thought to be a white, male, heterosexual of some privilege. And, further, anyone I might send a sext to is well aware of those identity markers. Thinking about intersectionality here raised the issue of not only who I might write to, but also how I might write if I were, say, female, Asian, Latina/o, transgender—the list goes on. I wanted to give myself a broader understanding of the role that socio-cultural context plays in sexting effectively. Even if I don't plan on regularly sexting all of my friends, the knowledge of how to do that could provide me with a better understanding of the complexities involved with the genre.

Instead of attempting to sext friends of different socio-cultural backgrounds, or to put myself in the place of a background different from my own, I decided to challenge heteronormativity by exploring the relationships to power that sexual desire is grounded in. I decided to take my exploration on a turn toward the kinkier side of sex. So, I was on to non-dominant forms of erotica to distance myself from the straight, white, male depictions of sexuality that the romance novels provided. Time to step up my literary game and dust off my copy of *Histoire d'O*. After all, if I'm planning to eventually write serious sext messages to Jess, I should first explore the complex power dynamics that have worked within our individual relationship. And what better than a critically-acclaimed, female-authored, sadomasochistic novel to

distance me from a heteronormative mindset? I decided to again start light—experimentation, even in a comical form, allowed me to get my feet wet. Here’s how it went:

Eric: I’m going to spank you.

Jess: Hmmm.

Eric: Mmmm?

Jess: Hmmm.

Eric: Hmmm.

Jess: . . .

Eric: I’m not going to spank you.

Baby steps. It’s possible that I could have moved further to escalate the level of sexuality in that set of text messages, but to do so still felt precipitate. What I picked up, though, and what these somewhat comic exchanges between Jess and me were helping me to figure out throughout my entire writing process, was this: when you’re reading erotica, or writing erotica for that matter, there is a tendency to jump right in. My comedic attempts to spark something sexual, the way I conducted the research from the beginning; it was all thrown together rather quickly, which might be okay, but it needs to be seen as no more than a step in the larger process of writing. It felt to me as though I wasn’t getting what I needed from my approach to research through erotica. What’s important here is to recognize the limitations inherent in any form of research. For one, there are the limitations of focusing on a single antecedent, or preexisting, genre—in this case, the genre of erotica as a part of the larger genre of sex writing. While it was very helpful in some ways, and got me to realize a number of things about the practice of sexting, it was also incomplete. In addition to that, my own limitations were made clear through this headlong dive into the field of erotica—and that was part of the problem; it is a field of study, a very broad field at that. In any form of research it is likely that deadlines and other obligations will arise. It seems naïve to think that it’s possible to master the study of erotica at all (even having moderate experience researching in the field), but even more so in the window of writing this article.

My goal in turning to erotica, of both the mainstream and literary varieties, was, as I have mentioned, to begin to establish a set of antecedent genres that have influenced how cultural practices of writing about sex have shaped how we might approach sexting, but also how those practices have shaped and have been shaped by our cultural perceptions of sexuality. In

order to write effectively in a given genre (for me, sexting) it is necessary to understand the trajectory that such a genre has traveled. Here we might understand trajectory as the complex set of influences and changes (both historical and cultural) that a genre moves through. While erotica is only one cultural practice that has had an influence on sexting, it provided a starting point for thinking about the multiplicity of factors that go into a specific form of writing. So, while I did take away a good amount of productive information from my brief scholarship of erotica, it was time to clearly set my research parameters and move on.

My next stop was Google. I decided to keep my first search inquiry simple: best sexts. I thought that would give me some direction in terms of how to craft the most effective sexts, but what it did instead was to interpret best as funniest, which led to some interesting realizations. The first site was TFLN, or Texts from Last Night, with which I was already somewhat acquainted. I recognized pretty quickly that the site wasn't going to be very helpful, in part because it broke one of my first dictums, don't misspell words to make them more sexual, e.g. the third item on the list of best texts: "and then she said I drew a line on her forehead with my cum and whispered 'Simba.'" Potentially funny, perhaps, but not entirely helpful. Given that research can often lead down tangential and divergent paths, it's necessary to recognize when you're moving off track and then to move on. So, I changed my search inquiry. But, before I did it was helpful to stop and consider a few things about my project as a whole.

My perspective, the perspective of this article, remains grounded within my relationship to Jess. It is important not to confuse *misogyny* with sexual *desire* (though this is already a fraught concept). My tactic of moving toward a more kinky approach to sexting is potentially problematic as well—after all, my position as a male combined with female submissiveness, when not looked at carefully, can itself seem misogynistic. Lynda Hart, in her book *Between the Body and the Flesh*, comments on this very notion saying that:

All our sexualities are constructed in a classist, racist, heterosexist, and gendered culture, and suppressing or repressing these fantasy scenarios is not going to accomplish changing that social reality. [. . .] I do think that being conscious about these issues as they appear in our *desires* is important to discuss, theorize and suspect. (33, emphasis added)

Put differently, we should not let issues of inequality dictate our sexual desires, but we *should* be aware that those desires are shaped by socio-cultural and historical inequalities. I think this is important to note given our current project of researching and writing within the genre of sexting, which is often grounded within structures of dominance,

hegemony, and desire. Not far back in this very article, I pulled a quote from *Texts From Last Night's* website that may have been offensive to some and might have made some readers uncomfortable—in fact, this entire article may be offensive to and uncomfortable for some readers. I think that part of what makes that particular quote *so* offensive is that it is located within a system of objectification and degradation that has very real effects for women in society. Further, the fact that it's framed as comedy makes it seem superfluous and gratuitous. The question that needs to be asked here (and this is a question that is part of a larger and much more radical argument) is whether or not a quote such as the Simba one can be productive in working through emotional reactions and (often) misplaced structures of belief. Can it help us to go deeper and ask *why* we find certain things so offensive? In thinking about these affective responses and belief structures, it may prove useful to apply Lynda Hart's advice to our broader views on sexuality. Rather than dismiss what we deem offensive, we might heed Hart's call to "discuss, theorize, and suspect" it. After all, if the goal is to be more accepting and to challenge what is considered "normal," then questioning what makes us uncomfortable might be the best place to start.

With that in mind, I moved on to searching for "How to sext," which led me down a bunch of dead ends. So, I switched to "Best sexting phrases," and that turned out to be more productive. The website I found most helpful was called *MadeMan.com*. Before I even opened the site, I was slightly put off by the website's domain name. *MadeMan.com* didn't sound like it had the potential to work against the issues of misogyny and heteronormativity that I wanted to disrupt through my exploration of queer theory. But, then I started to really think about the website's title. The idea that this socio-cultural notion of what we consider to be a *Man* is in fact *Made*, or culturally constructed, rather than being something we consider *essential*, or more simply common sense, fits perfectly with my queer theoretical leanings. Regardless of the website's intent in choosing their domain name, thinking about it in these terms is, in fact, a way to complicate the website and the article, both of which were presumably written for a dominant, heteronormative, male audience. This sort of transgressive thinking offers a way to *queer* the intended reception of a piece of writing—of any piece of writing. As you read the section that I have excerpted from the article, I urge you to consider how its use might be appropriated by a woman, by a gay woman, by a gay woman of color, by a gay woman of color with a disability, etc.—the ultimate goal being to collapse these identity markers.

Rather than recount the article on *MadeMan.com*, I'll post their top three sexts and the subsequent descriptions of them:

- **“Hey, I saw a movie and it got me thinking about you”**— Use this one of the ten best sexting phrases to get the conversation going. You can tell her about all of the steamy sex scenes that put you in the mood and run with it from there.
- **“Send me something naughty”**—After you’ve been talking for a while you can use this one of our ten best sexting phrases to move the conversation into something really naughty.
- **“What are you wearing”**—Yes we know it sounds cliché, but this one of our ten best sexting phrases is a classic when you’re trying to get some action started. She will know exactly where you’re going with this one of our ten best sexting lines, and it can be the start of building sexual tension.

This opened up a lot of doors for me. I knew from the beginning that throwing out explicit, genital related metaphors or imagery would likely not end well, but seeing examples of how to start slow, and do it effectively, really grounded the notion of sexting as a process for me—*sexting as a process* I take to mean the process of using nuance as a critical element to build toward something, but also, the process that I needed to go through as a writer: research, experimentation, failure and persistence allowed me to work through some of the complexities of the genre. Armed with a more thoughtful foundation of how to proceed when sexting, I was ready to move on to my new approach that I hoped would elevate the exchange to a level that Jess and I hadn’t before experienced. I knew that it was likely not plausible to reach a level of mastery in sexting (if there is such a thing), but that didn’t really seem all that important. What was important, for me, was getting to a point where I could write in this genre effectively, on my own terms, and do it in a way that was in line with what mattered to me. Here is how it went:

Eric: I watched this movie, and it made me think of you.

Jess: Is this a sext thing?

Eric: You’re a sext thing. Boom.

Jess: What movie was it?

Eric: The Piano Teacher. Do you know it?

Jess: Was that Haneke directing?

Eric: It was.

Jess: Did you think of me because I’ve been bad?

Eric: Tell me how you’ve been bad.

[. . .]

There's more, but you get the picture—we'll keep it potentially R-rated lest things start to get weird. Going back to my last research attempt, what I learned, in the process of synthesizing the information and actually forming my own sexts, was that what all three of the messages from the website had in common was that they used the power of suggestion to shift the focus to the other party. Nuance became important and so did insinuation. It wasn't until I physically started to write the sext and to imagine my audience, Jess, reading that sext that I was able to see how important the dynamic between myself, as the writer, and Jess, as the reader, really was. To do that I had to consider a multiplicity of different factors that all became imperative to what I was writing. Jess and my past sexual history, for example, came into play, but also all the different factors that went into shaping that sexual history. On top of that, issues mentioned earlier of reception and trajectory became influential in thinking about where Jess would be, what kind of mood she might be in, what the context of the sext was, where it could travel after being sent, how it might shift through context, and the list goes on. To extend that even further, considering how other people from different socio-cultural backgrounds differ and converge with my own sense of being was vital to understanding how I could most effectively compose. While it wasn't possible to consider every aspect of what goes into writing in this genre, I found that the more I was able to consider, the better and more effective the sext turned out to be.

To return, briefly, to the idea of limitations, I feel that it's both necessary and productive to conclude *this* article by discussing *its* limitations. I mentioned before that my own identity was at times problematic for me in undertaking this type of a project. The sorts of fieldwork that I was able to conduct (i.e. my sexts to Jess) were in some ways inadequate when attempting to frame the article within a model of queer theory. Further, the form that the article took, a personal narrative, made these limitations even more extensive. But rather than see these relations to hegemonic structures of power as problematic, or worse hypocritical, it is my hope that the subject position my identity affords within this article might be taken up by you, the reader, the audience, as a means of questioning the authority of the text itself—questioning the authority of all discourses on sexuality—and, foremost, questioning how that authority influences your own thinking and the thinking of others. Finally, I hope that this article might inspire some readers to be transgressive and to challenge what they accept as common sense.

Works Cited

Blue, Sameerah. "10 Best Sexting Phrases." *Mademan RSS*. Break Media, 20 Sept. 2010. Web. 15 Nov. 2012.

Hart, Lynda. *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadoomasochism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.

Réage, Pauline. *Histoire d'O*. Paris: J. P. Pauvert, 1972. Print.

“Sexting.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 01 Jan. 2013. Web. 15 Nov. 2012.

“Texts From Last Night.” *TFLN RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2012.

The Piano Teacher. Dir. Michael Haneke. By Michael Haneke. MK2 Diffusion, 2001. Film.



Eric Longfellow is pursuing a Ph.D. in English Studies from Illinois State University specializing in creative writing (primarily fiction). His interests include gender and sexuality studies and queer theory. It is rumored that he has an inappropriate tattoo, but he refuses to comment on it.

