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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Surviving Domestic Violence and Navigating the Academy: An Autoethnography

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## Abstract

This autoethnography takes a critical view of my experiences surviving domestic violence while navigating the university's resources to support survivors as well as my academic life. I turn to Spade's (2015) critical trans politics in order to complicate the notion of higher education structures as neutral and to question who benefits from existing domestic violence survivor support programs and procedures. Guided by Nash's (2004) guidelines for scholarly personal narrative, I tell my story of surviving in five parts, beginning with initial conversations and continuing with processes of surviving, leaving home, mandatory reporting, and (not) learning. Throughout the narrative, I analyze how my experiences illuminate broader implications for higher education. I conclude with recommendations for critically supporting survivors, and reflections on my own experiences and life a year later.

## Keywords

autoethnography, critical trans politics, domestic violence, higher education

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LOYOLA  
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*Preparing people to lead extraordinary lives*

*13-Sept. I flipped through the notebook where I keep [important information] and found the list of things I wanted to be sure to bring when I left my home ... I can feel so many of those moments. I don't remember writing down what I discovered [in the notebook] this evening but it makes sense that I did. I was trying to be immensely practical. I hid my emotions as much as I could. I couldn't afford [not to]—I had things to get done.*

*It's been a year.*

**A**t the beginning of my second year of pursuing my PhD, I left my home. It was days before the beginning of the semester that, with the help of my brother, I packed the most essential and sentimental things I could think of and left while my ex-partner was out of town. I made the decision to leave two days prior after a series of conversations helped me realize that I had taken on a new and unexpected identity as a survivor of domestic violence.

This autoethnography takes a critical view of my experiences surviving domestic violence while navigating the university's resources to support survivors as well as my academic life. I began writing this piece as part of my doctoral coursework over a year ago, urged on by a mentor and instructor who saw that I was hurting, saw I had a story to tell. I did, and I do; scholarly personal writing opens up the possibility to tell such stories as a form of scholarship (Nash, 2004).

I use a critical trans lens (Spade, 2015) to look at my story in order to better understand—and complicate—a higher education institution's systems of support for domestic violence survivors. I begin this essay with a brief background on relationship violence in higher education. I then describe autoethnography and critical trans politics, which guide the analysis of my story. I tell my story in five

parts, analyzing throughout how my experiences illuminate broader implications for higher education (in line with Nash, 2004). I conclude by suggesting implications around what I call "critical survivor support" and by reflecting on where I was a year later.

## Relationship Violence in Higher Education

Relationship violence, and especially sexual assault, has been a defining concern for higher education institutions, especially in the last several years. However, as Grace (2015) pointed out, "what seems to have been somewhat overlooked not only by the media but also by well-meaning administrators are the issues of dating and domestic violence." Indeed, dating and domestic violence are not only common on college campuses but are also likely to be more common than reported rates of such violence "because of the number of issues that complicate the reporting and measurement of dating violence" (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007, p. 81). These forms of relationship violence can be traumatic, and unhealthy relationships that comprise dating violence can lead to physical assault and other forms of violence (Hays, Michel, Bayne, Neuer Colburn, & Smith Myers, 2015).

Many college students experience forms of relationship violence including, but not limited to, sexual and physical violence, and psychological abuse. Although definitions of terms like relationship violence, dating violence, and domestic violence vary (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007), in general, these terms point toward unhealthy relationships in which one person physically or psychologically harms and/or exerts excessive control over another person. In this paper, I use the terms "domestic violence" and "relationship violence" interchangeably to describe my personal experiences. In particular, I use "domestic violence," defined legally as a "pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used

by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). I use this term because it was the label given to me when I reported my experience with relationship violence to units in my university.

Despite the relatively limited attention on relationship violence in higher education (Grace, 2015; Hays et al., 2015; Murray & Kardatzke, 2007; Wagner & Magnusson, 2005), some scholars have addressed forms of relationship violence. Much scholarship has focused on the dynamics of forms of relationship violence such as its effects on survivors (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007; see also Jordan, 2014; Randle & Graham, 2011; Sabina & Ho, 2014). Some scholars have uplifted the voices of relationship violence survivors through qualitative methods that emphasize the power of storytelling (Donovan & Hester, 2010; Oke, 2008; Olson, 2004; Wagner, 2008; Wagner & Magnusson, 2005). These methods serve to center the experience of the survivor and in doing so empower the survivor who, through their traumatic experience with relationship violence, may have previously felt disempowered.

Also encouraging in relationship violence scholarship are practice recommendations that address relationship violence through intervention programs (Hays et al., 2015) and trauma-informed counseling (Yoshimura & Campbell, 2016). Both practices aim to challenge what we might call “traditional” support for relationship violence survivors (i.e., a survivor reporting abuse shortly after it happened and receiving counseling at that point.) By implementing relationship violence intervention programs in higher education, students can learn habits for healthy relationships and therefore aim to prevent relationship violence. Trauma-informed counseling aims to support students with the possibility in mind that they carry unaddressed trauma, like that from relationship violence, and offers

the opportunity to support a survivor who may be dealing with long-lasting effects of such violence.

I enter the conversation on relationship violence by describing my own story as I survived domestic violence and navigated university resources designed to support survivors. My story offers a unique contribution by shifting away from the effects of violence and survivor support program evaluation and toward storytelling that complicates systems in place in the university and who is positioned to benefit from those systems. Further, my story complicates the idea of relationship violence as solely a women’s issue (cf. Parker & Lee, 2007; Wagner, 2008; Wagner & Magnusson, 2005). On the one hand, sexism is a pervasive force that women are subjected to, and relationship violence is part and parcel of sexism as a system of oppression. In order to work against relationship violence, we must acknowledge its pervasive role in harming women. On the other hand, there are relationship violence survivors who are not women (I am one of them, after all; see also Randle & Graham, 2011; Tillapaugh, 2016; Turchik & Edwards, 2012). I argue, then, that we must accept a level of ambiguity that relationship violence is both a women’s issue and one that cuts across all genders.

### **Scholarly Personal Narrative**

I use autoethnography, or scholarly personal narrative (Nash, 2004), in this essay to reflect on my own experiences with domestic violence as a means to extending and complicating existing literature on domestic violence in higher education. Nash (2004) described scholarly personal narrative (SPN) as scholarly writing that comes from the author’s own life experiences so that it “can deliver . . . those delicious aha! moments of self and social insight that are all too rare in more conventional forms of research” (p. 24). In autoethnography and SPN, the researcher examines

and analyzes their personal experiences with a given phenomenon or culture to illuminate particularities and address common (mis) understandings about that phenomenon or culture. Higher education scholars can use autoethnography to illuminate aspects of the institution to encourage change (e.g., Poon et al., 2016; Vander Kloet & Aspenlieder, 2013). Moreover, autoethnography fits an experience like surviving domestic violence because the method provides its author with an opportunity to reflect on an identity-changing experience (e.g., Preston, 2011) and to heal (e.g., Pearson, 2010).

The scholarly personal essay can shed light on a particular issue through a deeply personal lens. Because relationship violence is a traumatic personal experience, it is important to move beyond analyses of relationship violence that ignore survivors' voices. Scholars must seek to incorporate the voices of domestic violence survivors in research to empower survivors and to emphasize the deeply personal nature of relationship violence. As Nash (2004) advocated, "SPN is about giving yourself permission to express your own voice in your own language; your own take on your own story in your own inimitable manner" (p. 24). Giving myself permission to own and share my story and voice in this way has been empowering in being able to describe openly how I managed a traumatic experience that had at one time threatened my safety.

The data for this piece are an amalgamation of my memories, journal entries, and artifacts important to navigating the academy as a domestic violence survivor. Amassing and analyzing data was an iterative process. The first version of this paper was developed for a doctoral seminar in fall 2015. A year later, I recalled and wrote the entirety of my process of surviving, leaving, and navigating the academy. I pair this recollection of the experience with relevant artifacts, journal entries, and personal communications.

Nash's (2004) guidelines for writing SPN guide the analysis and organization of this paper. Regarding analysis, Nash recommended an SPN author "move from the particular to the general and back again" (p. 59) and "try to draw larger implications from your personal stories" (p. 60). All the while, Nash recommended, the author should not lose sight of telling their story. Thus, I aim to tell my story, while occasionally stepping away from the story to suggest broader implications.

### Positionality

Thinking about my story has demanded close consideration of my own identity, privileges, and power. I come with privileged and disadvantaged identities. As a White person from an upper-middle-class background, racism and classism have not confounded my experience of surviving relationship violence. I receive undue advantages in higher education and in society as a White person. These advantages undoubtedly eased my experience of surviving. Further, my family's ability to provide financial support translated to logistical support in my case. This financial position enabled my brother to drop everything and spend a weekend helping me move out and helped ease the burden of paying rent in two places.

However, I have faced various kinds of oppression because of my queerness both in regard to my gender (as a feminine, gender non-conforming person who was assigned, and is usually read as, male) and sexual orientation. To the topic of relationship violence, I felt that, as a queer person, many of the social scripts didn't apply to me. Specifically, the common narrative of survivors as women does not fit my experience. By addressing how gender complicates my experience, I do not aim to diminish the harms men commit against women. Rather, I hope to add to that narrative. In my case, it was a man who abused me; it is important to highlight that

men harm people of all genders. Because I am read as male, I am expected to be tough (see Walker, Archer, & Davies, 2005; Randle & Graham, 2011). By the same token, because I am feminine, I wondered sometimes if I deserved what happened to me because I was not “man enough” (see Dunn, 2012). In this way, my gender complicates my experience of surviving.

Queerness colors my experience in two more important ways. Firstly, as a queer person, I do not have the volumes of relationship examples and recommendations straight people have to refer to. Secondly, if I wish to seek out support within a queer community, I come up against the challenge that my ex-partner is still part of that community too. The smallness of queer communities and relative isolation of queer people (especially in less-populous areas, such as where I live now) means that my ex and I are still in close proximity socially. Such closeness makes leaving and surviving that much more challenging.

Finally, as a doctoral student, I argue that I sit in a paradox of advantage and disadvantage. For example, my meager stipend at the time I left my ex-partner made affording many of the basics we shared in our home a challenge. Despite financial support from my family, I still racked up considerable debt in the months immediately following leaving my ex. That said, being in the academy has given me opportunities to heal. Many of the individuals and resources that helped me were connected to the institution I attend. Not to mention that this very manuscript evolved out of a paper I first wrote for a class I was enrolled in at the time of leaving my ex. My instructor and peers alike encouraged me to develop this project and thus share my story. In this way, the academy provided me with the opportunity to process, to reflect, to heal. Although these advantages are not unique to the academy per se, they nonetheless highlight how my membership in a higher education institution

points to access to resources and healing in a way that may not be available to others.

### **Critical Trans Politics**

Spade’s (2015) framework of critical trans politics guides much of my thinking about my experience navigating the academy as I survived domestic violence. Critical trans politics helps me think through my experiences in terms of how institutional policies and procedures are employed. Jourian (2017) described that the critical trans framework “challenges mainstream assumptions that institutional structures are neutral, and positions administrative systems such as higher education institutions as constantly reproducing dominant meanings and boundaries of gender” (p. 247). In this way, critical trans politics illuminates how a higher education institution subjects individuals to identities. In Jourian’s (2017) study, critical trans politics allowed him to illuminate the experiences of trans\*masculine college students and talk about the administration and picture of gender norms institutions perpetuated. In this study, I too complicate the administration of identity, specifically as it relates to systems of support and reporting for survivors of relationship violence.

Furthermore, a critical trans framework helps illuminate how the survivor subject is constructed. I draw, too, on the notion of subjectivity (see, for example, Ahmed, 2000; Nealon & Giroux, 2003), or how one becomes constructed as a subject. Specifically, these lenses allow me to consider how the institution subjects the individual to the survivor moniker (and identity). Considering the institutional subjectification of survivor challenges the traditional notion that the survivor’s identity is individually established. In sum, using a critical trans framework allows me to talk about not only how I experienced surviving domestic violence but also some ways in which the institution processed

me through the necessary steps of surviving. Pitcher (2015) suggested that the critical trans framework helps us ask whom certain policies and procedures are intended to benefit. By talking about my personal experiences with the very policies and procedures intended to help survivors, I hope to address the advantages, limitations, and even damages, of policies and procedures intended to support survivors.

### My Story

“That night on, I didn’t feel as comfortable staying in the house. That night and the next, I locked my bedroom door—it had a dead bolt.” I wrote this about the nights following a terrifying encounter with my ex-partner. After a turbulent summer, that moment was the tipping point. What follows is an amalgamation and analysis of my memories, journal entries, and other records that illustrate what followed in my experience of surviving domestic violence.

#### “You Have to Leave.”

My ex-partner was out of town for the weekend, and at the recommendation of close friends and counselors, I vowed to leave the house we shared. “Many people agreed I needed to get out and that his planned day away ... was a good opportunity to do so,” I wrote in an online document for recordkeeping purposes. My ex and I had ended our three-year relationship, which had evolved into (and out of) a promise of marriage, just a few weeks earlier. Although we had broken up, however, the very harm that had brought our tumultuous relationship to an end continued.

“You have to leave,” a close friend told me on the phone on one particularly bad night. I don’t remember what I said in reply, but I remember surrendering. I was tired of giving my ex passes mentally. I knew there was

someone I could talk to on campus, someone who could counsel me both emotionally and logistically.

I did talk to that colleague the following morning. I got to her office relatively early and laid out everything that had happened. She asked me what I would recommend to one of my own students had they come to me with that story, and I knew the answer. I just never imagined I would have to ask myself that question. My professional work for the year prior had involved some support for sexual assault and relationship violence survivors. Indeed, I had counseled at least one rape survivor and supported many more students in times of crisis, confusion, and pain. How did I become the one needing counseling? How come I couldn’t just take care of myself?

These questions wracked my brain, even as someone who had told other people that the abuse they faced wasn’t their fault, even as someone who truly believed that people who looked to others for help were strong for doing so. Imagine, then, the situation for someone who hasn’t delved into such nuances or someone who has internalized ways of thinking that promote rugged individualism or other hegemonic norms (see Turchik & Edwards, 2012). My position as a scholar may have thus benefitted me in processing these thoughts. And yet, even when I knew something to be true (i.e., that abusive relationships aren’t the survivor’s fault, that strong people turn to others for support), it was hard to internalize it for my own life. Such a challenge complicates the possibility of leaving and, consequently, the possibility of surviving.

#### Surviving

My colleague pointed me toward HAVEN<sup>1</sup>, a campus resource for sexual assault and relationship violence survivors. I called and left a message, and later in the afternoon I got a call back and talked through my situation with



a HAVEN counselor. Despite my colleague's words, "you know what you'd say if this was one of your students," I wasn't sold on the prospect of leaving home. The counselor took a more absolute approach. She suggested that what I had told her sounded like signs of abuse yet to come if I didn't leave home. In a follow-up email, she gave me resources on a state statute that would allow me to break my lease and some PDFs of handouts about unhealthy relationships and abuse. Also attached was a template for a letter I could send to my landlord to be released from my lease.

That letter template sent chills down my spine. It was the first time I would see myself labeled (literally) as "a survivor of domestic violence." I certainly was coming to accept that what I had gone through was not okay, but I wasn't ready for my experience to be named like that. I had to re-read the template letter a few times to believe it.

In this way, I was subjected to an identity by the very structure of existing support built to help me. I use the word "subjected" intentionally here; Nealon and Giroux (2003) described being a "subject," as opposed to a "self," as "having one's personhood defined not by intrinsic or internal qualities but by external factors" (p. 37). One is a subject, therefore, when defined by others outside oneself. In my case, I did not come to see myself as a survivor until I was described as such by an outside source. I am subject to surviving domestic violence. Nealon and Giroux's (2003) construction of the subject as one who "is necessarily responding to things that happen" (p. 38, emphasis theirs) is especially salient here. My survivor identity was (and is) a response to the violence I faced.

I found the notion of becoming a survivor problematic for another reason. At the moment I was first subjected as a survivor, I was

still living with my ex-partner and felt hurt and scared. I wanted to survive, of course, but I disliked the term survivor because surviving domestic violence was not in my past; it was happening to me at that moment (see also Benoit-Bryan, 2014). It was a triumph I did not feel I had yet achieved. I had not (yet) survived, I was surviving. Donovan and Hester (2010) took issue with the term survivor, as well, while also suggesting that the prominent alternative of victim may construct the subject as weak, as victimized. Thus, they put forth the term victim/survivor, a pairing that resonated with me at the time. I wanted to survive, but I also wanted others to understand the pain I felt. I did not feel the term survivor captured such pain as well as victim did, so being a victim/survivor or surviving fit me better. My experience thus complicates template-style approaches to supporting survivors. The subjectification involved in support tools like the template letter implies that all survivors must feel the same way and reduces the diversity of experiences of surviving.

All told, I don't know if that letter made things better or worse. I would eventually draft my own version, attach the HAVEN counselor's report as evidence, and then hear back from my landlord. And according to the Michigan statute I invoked, I was still on the hook for paying rent for two more months. I got out of my lease, but at no small cost to my mental health and bank account. As I write about it over a year later, I remain frustrated by the hoops to jump through and the way I was slapped with a label without my say in the matter.

### **Leaving**

My brother had come to help me move that weekend. It was bittersweet to see him—on his birthday, no less—given the circumstances. My brother and I have grown close in our adult lives, after fighting a lot as kids. Some

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<sup>1</sup> Help Against Violence for Every Need, a pseudonym

years ago, I was one of the first people he told that he and my sister-in-law were pregnant with their first child, now my godson. And in the final months of living with my ex-partner, he was one of few confidantes I had when I needed someone to talk to about my relationship.

He was tight on money, so our parents chipped in and got him a hotel room in the area. I didn't want him to stay with me because I wanted to make sure my ex would actually be away. I did not want to arouse any suspicion. The HAVEN counselor had convinced me not to tell my ex that I was leaving, which was hard to do; I had grown so accustomed to telling him everything. For god's sake, it wasn't long before that we planned to get married. Being honest with my partner was so important to me, so the idea of leaving our home behind his back was hard for me to justify. But I was afraid, and tired. I didn't want to see what hell was yet to come. I put all my trust in others who told me I should leave. I was helpless. But by surrendering control to these trusted counselors, I hoped I wouldn't be helpless much longer.

My brother and I got important things out—I had written a checklist of some of the most vital items to prepare for our morning of packing and moving. HAVEN provided a list, as well, to remind me of what was important. At the time, their list seemed obvious. It included items like my passport, birth certificate, and checkbooks. But today, when I reflect on my mental state, I realize the importance of explicitly naming what's important to bring along. In situations of high stress, a person's attention is narrowed, and they may not be able to consider things that others might find obvious (MacKeracher, 2004). It is apt to say that I was under significant stress and needed others to bear some of the load. Not only was I managing a serious emotional burden, but I also needed to consider the logistics of moving out of my home and finding a new place

to live in a matter of a few days. The challenge of thinking under stress suggests that reminding a survivor of things that may seem obvious, such as “remember to bring your birth certificate if you leave,” is good practice.

I was fortunate that my supervisor was aware of my situation and understanding about my taking time to manage leaving. I cannot imagine what this situation would have been like had that not been the case. The various burdens of leaving—emotional, financial, and logistical—are significant and help explain why many people do not leave abusive partners. Counselors and institutions, thus, must be understanding of these burdens and identify ways to lessen the burdens and also improve counseling for survivors who choose to stay in their homes. The critical trans framework points to a number of options that serve the latter (Spade, 2015).

I am fortunate, too, that I had a place to leave to. Culturally, we like to ask why a victim/survivor doesn't leave, all the while ignoring that leaving is not just a departure but also an arrival somewhere else. For me, a friend put me up while I searched for a place I could move to. Within a week, I had an apartment of my own. HAVEN offered me help with relocation if I needed it.

Such a request may not, however, be typical of universities. HAVEN is an unusual campus resource, one of the only ones of its kind in the country. Although some institutions may offer support to relocate violence survivors, I question if universities have sufficient resources to do so and if students know they can (and should, when necessary) access such resources. Furthermore, not all survivors want to, or can, relocate. Universities and their agents (e.g., counselors) must be prepared to support the survivor who wants to stay just as they would support the survivor who leaves.

## **Mandatory Reporting**

The days and weeks that followed were painful, confusing, lonely, and maddening. I changed my phone number and all my internet passwords. I wondered if I'd see my dog again. It wasn't long after leaving that I received an early morning text message. A colleague had reported my ex for stalking. I knew about mandatory reporting and the importance of erring on the side of over- rather than under-reporting. But I wanted to bury what had happened. I did not want to talk to investigators or administrators. I didn't want to talk to anybody, I just wanted to continue my graduate education. My ex had fucked up my personal life; I wasn't going to let this situation fuck up my schoolwork, too. But then I thought, anything that may make me feel better, or safer, was worthwhile.

As a subject in the mandatory reporting process, my conversations with investigators were minimally helpful. I was panicked going into my meetings with these people, more concerned about whether I would be a good enough victim/survivor for them. I wondered how much of the story they already knew. I didn't want them to think it was my fault, and I didn't want them to pity me. In our conversations, I tried to focus as much as possible on the help I needed. Primarily, I wanted to know how to go about getting the things I had left behind—a few hours of moving on a day's notice does not give much of an opportunity to move a life's worth of belongings. Their suggestions pointed me in the right direction, but these were slivers of our conversations. I felt like the police officer I spoke to was better equipped to help me press charges than get my belongings back or deal with the myriad emotions I was experiencing. Because of this contrast—that the institution can punish those who harm but is minimally equipped to help those who are harmed—I ask if what institutions call support for survivors is supportive at all (see also Bogdanich, 2014; Weiss & Lasky, 2017).

I declined pressing charges. I sometimes wish I had pressed charges or requested my ex be banned from campus so I could be a “better” victim. I wish I had the paper trail to point to and say, “See? I did due diligence. I went through what I said I went through.” The mere prospect of not being believed terrifies me. Even telling my story to close friends and family leaves me with anxiety because of the preponderance of survivors whose stories are rejected by others. And yet, had I pressed charges, would that have made me safer? I return to my question of how institutions are serving survivors and not just inflicting punishment in the name of such service. Pressing charges emphasizes punishment, not my own healing. Furthermore, turning such a process over to the criminal justice system disproportionately harms people from minoritized groups (Spade, 2015). From a critical trans point of view, it is important to resist forms of survivor “support” that rely on oppressive, inequitable systems.

## **(Not) Learning**

I tried to keep my feelings from infecting my academic life. That semester, I had three courses, new membership on a research team, and my assistantship to balance. As I look back through some of my notes and journals, I remember my feelings of anger. For example, in two separate courses, I criticized two different authors for similar things. Specifically, I bemoaned what I perceived as these authors' ignoring of their own positionalities in their work. “What business do these authors have telling the stories of marginalized,” I wrote, “when they can't acknowledge their own privilege as established academics?” I wonder now if my feelings of powerlessness in the face of leaving home drove this anger. I felt envious of those who had voices, who had power. Such a feeling thus reveals the importance of restoring the voices of survivors.

I also connect this feeling of powerlessness

to how I sometimes felt in my classes. On the first day of class that semester, I had not yet found a new place to live and was staying in a friend's spare bedroom. Partway through the first class of the semester, I felt the urge to scream. "How can I just sit here and pretend like my life isn't in shambles," I wondered. "How can all these people sit around me and be okay with a world that clearly isn't okay?" I had no idea what the future would hold. I had no desire to talk about research design when I wasn't sure where I'd be sleeping that weekend, when I hadn't yet accepted I had said goodbye to my dog for the last time, and when I was suddenly dealing with police and lawyers.

Worse yet, I felt like I couldn't talk about what I was going through. I didn't know how. I felt ashamed and scared and tired. I didn't want to stay in my home, but I didn't really want to leave either. I wished I could just be back to the relative normalcy I had enjoyed in the years prior.

It seemed to me at the time that my coursework had no bearing on my life, a concerning sign for my learning. Appropriate stress levels, relevance to life, and readiness to learn are all important aspects for adult learning (MacKeracher, 2004). Going through my experiences of surviving and navigating the academy caused an abundance of stress, certainly enough to interfere with my learning. Further, I was disengaged because of the many other life circumstances—emotional and logistical—I needed to manage.

By contrast, I think about the class for which I originally developed a draft of this essay. The opportunity my instructor offered to have me develop an autoethnography about my trauma bridged my life experiences with the academic rigor he expected of me as a doctoral student. Wagner and Magnusson (2005) echo the importance of careful inclusion of surviving relationship violence in the

curriculum. Furthermore, adult learners are more likely to succeed in a course when the course is relevant to their life (MacKeracher, 2004; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). As I have described, the emotions and logistics associated with surviving were at the forefront of my mind. A class that allowed me to draw on those experiences was quite relevant indeed.

### Critical Survivor Support

In their review of relationship violence support services, some of the themes Macy, Giattina, Parish, and Crosby (2010) identified were the need for more understanding around relationship violence and funding for supporting survivors, and the importance of acknowledging the many identities survivors bring with them. I agree with their recommendations and will address them in relation to my experiences here.

First, campus leaders and scholars cannot treat surviving domestic violence, or any other form of relationship violence, as a simple thing. Moreover, as Wagner (2008) argued, "mere policy changes or liberal reforms [in the academy] will be inadequate" (p. 101). Support for survivors cannot be an adjustment to the status quo. Instead, leaders must reimagine how the academy thinks about survivors and their experiences. I echo some of the recommendations Wagner and Magnusson (2005) put forth, including "enhanced counseling services, support groups, [and] a broader acknowledgement of the issue within curriculum" (p. 459).

Second, I remind institutional decision makers to consider who is benefitting from what is implemented when building understanding and resources for relationship violence survivors. At my home institution, the president has emphasized our sexual assault and relationship violence prevention program, which prioritizes prevention over punitive measures. Such a program seems like a good practice,

if implemented well. However, she has also celebrated “greater cooperation between campus police and local law enforcement agencies” (Simon, 2015), which raises questions about the role of police in relationship violence prevention and support for survivors (see Sullivan & Hagen, 2005; Walker et al., 2005). As I have addressed, the role of police is primarily punitive and subjects survivors to a mandatory reporting process that should be questioned. Keeping in mind that these systems are designed to benefit some over others is vital to what I call “critical survivor support.”

My conceptualization of critical survivor support consists of institutional actions that derive from Spade’s (2015) critical trans politics. To flesh out this concept, I take inspiration from organizations Spade described as those that “contend that policing and criminal punishment exacerbates [sic] racist, colonial, sexist, homophobic, ableist, transphobic, and anti-immigrant violence in their communities, and are experimenting with transformative approaches to dealing with harms such as intimate partner violence, child abuse, and bashing” (p. 122). These organizations, then, take an intersectional approach to systemic oppression (Crenshaw, 1989) and aim to benefit those who face serious inequities.

Initiatives like those Spade (2015) described as supporting individuals outside the system can guide university work intended to prevent relationship violence and support survivors. Taking such a critical stance on prevention and support is at the heart of critical survivor support. Initiatives consistent with this concept acknowledge that “criminal punishment responses often mistreat the survivor and take decision making out of their hands and ... focus on caging the person who did the harm but provide no resources to prevent them from harming again” (Spade, 2015, p. 125–126). Critical survivor support accounts for this fundamental flaw in criminal pun-

ishment and asks a university community, first, how they are treating those who survive violence and, second, how they are preventing further violence. Institutional policies around mandatory reporting and campus police responses to violence minimally respond to these concerns (Weiss & Lasky, 2017).

Spade (2015) recommended some alternatives to common approaches to support survivors. One organization Spade pointed out, The Northwest Network, teaches “relationship skills’ classes” (p. 122) to help people within Seattle communities develop awareness of intimate partner violence. In doing so, the organization is able to help prevent such violence before it reaches police, courts, or other systems that perpetuate harm to minoritized communities. Another project, Creative Interventions, was created by a collective of organizations in Oakland. Its organizers developed a toolkit and collection of stories on community-based responses to violence.

On my campus, we have a sexual assault and relationship violence prevention program that focuses more on the importance of recognition and prevention of violence. As I have indicated, however, such programs are but one piece of the puzzle. What are the ways in which the institution supports survivors? Recall that I largely turned to personal, not institutional, networks for support (see also Tillapaugh, 2016). I fear for the individual surviving interpersonal violence who does not have networks equipped to support them. Recall also the role of the curriculum in my wellness as a survivor. The opportunity for survivors to write and talk about their trauma as they see fit allows us to process, reflect, and heal (Wagner, 2008; Wagner & Magnusson, 2005). All these strategies may be useful in shifting toward a critical enactment of survivor support.

Finally, supporting survivors with increased understanding and acknowledging their di-

verse identities is a must. A university's implementation of critical survivor support must better understand and acknowledge survivors' many identities and experiences. Tillapaugh (2016) argued that the dominant narrative of (cisgender, heterosexual) women as survivors erases cisgender male and trans survivors and that these "survivors internalize [sic] that erasure and are troubled by being rendered invisible" (p. 15). The enduring dominance of majoritized groups (such as cisgender people and White people) in research on and practice for survivors contributes to erasure and invisibility of, for example, people of color and trans people (Tillapaugh, 2016). Thus, practitioners and scholars must consciously and proactively hear and respect the stories of survivors who hold minoritized social identities and support them accordingly.

I do not believe critical survivor support practices are simple to implement, nor should they be. Relationship violence is a systemic, not individualized, issue and as such requires a reimagination of the very systems at play in the academy. Practitioners must engage in hard work to transform the academy into a space that promotes survivors' healing.

### A Year Later

*13-Sept. ... It's been a year. I haven't taken the time to think about that much. ...*

*I threw away many of the pictures—all of them, I hope—that I had kept in my cards and pictures box. The box is still full of memories. Cards from Grammie. Pictures of friends' children .... And I found pictures of [my nephew and niece] to put up on my wall. They're there now.*

*This space has never felt more like home. This is the unimagined of a year ago. This apartment was empty. I had my desks and bed but no couch. My bookcases weren't even back yet. I don't know how I juggled getting my things*

*with my other demands. It makes grad school this semester feel easy by comparison. I have paid off almost all the debt I accrued—or rather, reorganized that debt into manageable chunks. I have filled my space with meaningful things, comfortable things. I have welcomed friends into the space, and even have a small social network that I can draw on somewhat. Certainly more than a year ago, when I was still getting my new phone number to people.*

*It's hard now to unravel this experience from my writing about it. I jumped into writing, not yet knowing how hurt I still felt. How scared I felt. How ashamed I felt. I have still not talked about these feelings at length.*

*When I threw away the ring, I was surprised to feel sadness—not anger or relief or hate or fear. I felt sad. Not so much that I want to go back—ugh, never—but enough that I thought about happy times. Calling my parents after he proposed. Valentine's Day on the west side of the state. But I thought of what a problem the relationship was from early on. How quickly we attached. How not long after we fought. And moved in together. ... I'm not blaming myself, but I know at the same time I could have done better.*

*24-Sept. After I grabbed a beer from the fridge, I saw my apartment—stopped and really thought about it. Dusk is settling outside. I thought of how full this space is compared to a year ago. ... It was a moment of reflection, thinking of how the things around me reflect how very far I've come in the last year. I have built a home and a life.*

The university did not prepare me to survive. They named me a survivor, and I now do the surviving. But what has made me stronger and helped me along is a community of support. I don't know what I would have done without the emotional, logistical, and material support of my network. In some ways, I knew from the outset that a network of support

would be vital to me as I navigated surviving. What I did not know, however, was that it is reasonable to lean on that network, to ask for help. And I did not know, as I know now, that I could write about my experiences in a way that parts of the academy value.

The critical trans lens, which informs critical survivor support, calls upon me as a scholar to ask, for whom does the university's system of support work and for whom does it not work? As a White person from a middle-upper class background, I am aware that my background helped me navigate the academy as a survivor. Does the university provide the level of support necessary for the student of color, the first-generation student, or the disabled student to survive domestic violence?

Today, I survive. I tell my story. My communities of support continue to be invaluable. By affirming our stories and building supportive communities, the university can heed the call to help survivors survive.

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