

2013

## Living and Leaving Lolita: An Autoethnography of Identification and Transcendence

Rebecca Murphy-Keith  
*Arizona State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope>

---

### Recommended Citation

Murphy-Keith, Rebecca (2013) "Living and Leaving Lolita: An Autoethnography of Identification and Transcendence," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*: Vol. 12 , Article 7.  
Available at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol12/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

# Living and Leaving Lolita: An Autoethnography of Identification and Transcendence

Rebecca Murphy-Keith  
Arizona State University  
beccamurphykeith@asu.edu

---

*The dominant discourses around Lolita frame her as either an empowered seductress or a passive victim, but neither discourse delves into what it means to be Lolita, what it is like to embody the construct. Using a critical lens and layered autoethnographic account, I invite readers to experience and reflect on what it means to live Lolita. I argue that as an avatar for the present construction of femininity, Lolita operates as a tool of symbolic violence. By expressing the consequences of living Lolita and connecting my narrative to the broader social construction of gender, I hope to challenge the discursive constraint felt by subjects of abuse and reveal that the unremitting inculcation of femininity (through constructs like Lolita) blocks natural growth and development and constitutes a form of cultural abuse.*

*Keywords: Autoethnography; Lolita; Femininity; Abuse; Narrative Reframing*

---

## Novel Beginnings

Before 1955 “Lolita” was just one name among many. Now, the use of Lolita-based imagery is so pervasive that it has spawned eponymous terms, such as the “Lolita Syndrome” and the “Lolita Complex,” the first denoting the secret longings of middle-aged men for young girls, the second denoting a pathologic desire for underage girls (Stringer-Hye, 2002, p. 154). Even Merriam-Webster (1998) defines the noun *Lolita* as “a precociously seductive girl.” Lolita may have begun her titled existence as a literary character, but her clones now saturate the cultural landscape of the United States (Durham, 2008). She is present in film, fashion, music, “reality” TV, and sensational news stories. Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997) have not cornered the market on filmic representations; she reappears in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), *The Crush* (Shapiro, 1993), and *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999) just to name a few. She can be spied with legs spread and white panties exposed in Calvin Klein’s 1995 infamous underwear ad campaign. Pop divas Mariah Carey, Madonna and Britney Spears channel her in their videos and pictures.

---

Rebecca Murphy-Keith is a Ph.D. student at Arizona State University in the Hugh Downs School of Communication. As this essay was largely drawn from her master’s thesis, the author would like to thank University of North Carolina Greensboro professors Chris Poulos and Roy Schwartzman for their feedback and encouragement. Portions of this essay have been presented at the Eastern Communication Association Convention, Cambridge, MA, April 2012.

She is personified by the painted babies on *Toddlers and Tiaras* and invoked when discussing the tragically titillating cases of JonBenét Ramsey and Amy Fisher. All of these depictions situate the Lolita character within one of two frames of discourse. The first frames Lolita as consciously seductive and celebrates her sexual “empowerment” (Roiphe, 1998), and the other frames her as a “powerless victim” subject to the predatory whims of a pedophile (Bordo, 1999; Harad, 2003; Patnoe, 2002).

The novel *Lolita* is narrated by Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged European intellectual with a taste for prepubescent girls to whom he refers as “nymphets.” He finds in 12-year-old Dolores Haze, a.k.a. Lolita, a paragon of this type, and becomes so captivated by her that he marries Lolita’s widowed mother just to infiltrate her home. Shortly after discovering Humbert’s interest in Lolita, the mother is killed by a car in the street. Humbert then assumes guardianship of Lolita and takes her on an extended trip with the explicit purpose of initiating a sexual relationship. With the help of playwright and filmmaker Clare Quilty, Lolita manages to escape Humbert’s clutches, only to leave Quilty soon after to marry a third man and die in childbirth at the age of seventeen.

As tempting as it is to entirely attribute the birth of this cultural phenomenon to *Lolita* the novel, Vladimir Nabokov is more akin to Pygmalion and his ivory carving; it takes a source outside the artist to bring the construct to life. Cultural artifacts and discourses do not arise spontaneously—they are “manufactured” (Thomas, 1993, p. 50). The heterosexual and gendered script of masculine desire prompting the pursuit and taming of females, and the concurrent pressure of femininity on females to submit, existed long before Nabokov articulated such desire and submission through the fictional forms of Humbert and Lolita; it is precisely because these sentiments predate the novel that the forms given by Nabokov resonate so deeply with males and females alike. Our broad cultural acceptance and expansion of the Lolita construct is not typically perceived as an act of violence; however, present incarnations of Lolita do little good and have the potential to do great harm. While much is said about Lolita by the Humberts and Clare Quilts of the world, little attention is paid to what it means to “be” Lolita, what it is like to live out the dominant discourses of victim and seductress. Questions about the material effects of “living Lolita” are lost in the tumult of titillation and taboo.

For most of my life I have embodied either one or the other of the dominant discourses (sometimes both simultaneously) around Lolita. My mother married not one pedophile, but two. I was sexually abused by my biological father when I was four and by my stepfather between the ages of ten and twelve. Elizabeth Patnoe (2002) calls for a resuscitation of the Lolita character, a reclaiming of the book, and an insistence upon experiences with and around it in order to “counter the Lolita myth distortions and resist some of the cultural appropriations of female sexuality” (p. 115). She suggests that by advancing background voices to the fore—by reclaiming ourselves, our voices, our stories— abuse victims and instrumentalized

women can potentially confront the myths that aestheticize and romanticize molestation, that pre-sexualize children, and that make pedophilia appealing. My experiences and subsequent personal odyssey allow me a unique insider perspective, one that I feel an ethical obligation to share.

Even if you have never read Nabokov's novel or experienced sexual abuse, you likely know or have encountered a Lolita in your life. On the surface you may or may not see saddle shoes, knee socks, and a plaid mini skirt; visual markers of the literary character. What makes a Lolita goes far deeper than age, clothing, or experience of sexual abuse; it is an attitude, a mindset, a pattern of behaving and of performing for others to the detriment of one's ability to self-actualize. As a person who has lived and struggled to leave Lolita I argue that both the empowered and powerless interpretations stem from the same core concept of archetypal femininity and therefore have the same fatal flaw. The acceptance of external constructions and acting accordingly is the predominant feature of Lolitism and femininity. This internalization of external evaluation and the desire for approval is what I consider to be the central feature of what it means to "be" or embody Lolita.

If femininity is grounded in gentleness, nurturance, and deference, then to the extent that women embody this feminine ideal they are not allowed to be adults (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1970). The unremitting inculcation of femininity (through constructs like Lolita) blocks natural growth and development and therefore constitutes a form of "cultural abuse" (Carol Bly, as cited in Pipher, 1994, p. 293). Such abuse affects those subject to it on three integrated and mutually reinforcing levels: physical health, mental/emotional health, and social interaction. As an avatar for the present construction of femininity, Lolita is a tool of symbolic violence. Regardless of whether one internalizes the empowered and active seductress, or the passive victim of patriarchal violence, both discourses appropriate preferred meanings and repress alternative life trajectories. As victim or seductress Lolita is a symbol that imposes, suppresses, and distorts ways of thinking, seeing and talking (Thomas, 2003). Men are encouraged to objectify women, and women are encouraged to see themselves through the eyes of others rather than cultivating an independent and self-reflective gaze. In addition, as a heteronormative construction, Lolita ignores other expressions of sexuality and gender and serves to mark those who do not or cannot follow the script as "other."

Autoethnography allows me to articulate the processes through which I identify and transcend the literary and cultural characterizations of Lolita. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (p. 1). As a critically minded communication scholar I believe it is better to challenge unequal social conditions than to perpetuate them through silence or denial. I am convinced that as a cultural system, gender inhibits the "development of our full human

potential” (Thomas, 2003, p. 70) and should therefore be altered. Thus, it is my intent that my experiences serve as a call to action, as a catalyst for social change, through expressing the lived consequences and limitations of Lolita.

Turning an interpretive lens on the self in this way requires a high degree of reflexivity and is accomplished through “detachment, internal dialogue, and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of ‘what I know’ and ‘how I know it’” (Goodall, 2000, p. 137; Hertz, 1997). Such detachment is possible only in retrospect—as I lived Lolita I was too close, too invested in what the construct offered to see beyond it. Now I see how living as either version of Lolita caters to and reinforces the social construction/regulation of gender. The acceptance, internalization, and even celebration of the discourses around Lolita serve to legitimize and conceal underlying power relations based on gender performance. More than anything I desire to challenge the repressive influence of gender, to aid in the emancipation from its constraining modes of thinking and acting that limit our perception of and action toward “realizing alternative possibilities” (Thomas, 1993, p. 6).

I have long been aware of what Rambo Ronai (1997) describes as “discursive constraint,” the social (and scholarly) resistance to stories like mine. The fact that people are not comfortable hearing transgressive accounts is precisely why such narratives should be examined by communication scholars. Constructive and enduring change cannot occur in society unless the censoring of and silence around experiential accounts of abuse are challenged. I take the emotional and professional risks of sharing such painful experiences not because I want pity or praise, but because I find intrinsic rewards in reworking restrictive concepts so as to challenge the social inertia around such constructs. Doing so is an empowering means to experience the world. It is my hope that sharing my narrative will provide a deeper understanding of the Lolita construct and the underlying gendered expectations that limit potential agency and growth. As I see it, the solution lies neither in denying the experiences in and around Lolita, nor in giving an artificial redemptive closure to the narrative, but rather in reframing and self-authoring a narrative that allows for continuous growth as a human being.

Reconstructing my life as Lolita is an act of intellectual and artistic creation with political purpose. Reframing my abuse experiences allows me to place the responsibility on my parents as well as the cultural constructs that encourage such abuse. Through the act of reframing I reclaim my voice, my body, and my life, and also challenge the discourses that isolate and silence others who are abused. In what follows I use combined or layered account analysis of Nabokov’s novel with cultural manifestations of the Lolita construct, as well as memories, key life events, and subjective knowledge gained through scholarly study and introspection. I begin with an analysis of the discourses surrounding Lolita as victim, then move to an analysis of the discourses surrounding Lolita as seductress, and conclude with the broader significance of the Lolita construct beyond a sexual abuse context.

## Lolita as Victim

*I am in my paternal grandparents' basement and they have left for somewhere with my older sister. I am surrounded by darkness except for where a small square of afternoon sunlight peeps through a single narrow window. There is just enough light to reveal a pull-out sofa bed flanked by tables with brass lamps, and a worktable where a ceramic basket shaped like a watermelon awaits finishing touches. Although I cannot see it, the basement also contains my grandfather's carpentry workshop and the smell of sawdust tickles my nose. Next to a lamp, on the table in front of me, are a large jar of Vaseline and a box of tissues.*

*Behind me in the bed is the body of my father. I cannot see him but I can hear his breathing and feel something hot and hard yet soft sliding back and forth between my thighs. I can't speak. I can't move. I am still in uncomprehending terror. I cry out as a shaft of light rips through the darkness and down the basement stairs. His large hand holds my small arm to keep me close as he murmurs:*

*"It's OK. Nobody's there. It's only the dogs."*

*I look again and, sure enough, the silhouettes of my grandparents' dogs appear in the rectangle of light at the top of the stairs. This interruption is enough to break the spell and his hand lets go. I am four years old.*

This memory is repressed for over six years and its resurfacing is nearly as traumatic at ten years old as the original event was on my four-year-old psyche. The trigger? Unaware of my eavesdropping, my mother and stepfather discussed the imminent release of my biological father from prison. The five-year incarceration was due to his extended sexual abuse of my older sister, not because he had abused me. No one knew then, and very few in my family know now, that he got me as well. My innocence and the events being beyond my control notwithstanding (Daly, 2004; Young & Maguire, 2003), I knew that I could not claim assistance, sympathy, relief from responsibilities, or legal recourse (Gavey, 1999, p. 58). I knew I was innocent, but I also knew that I had to keep that knowledge to myself. My sister was innocent and our biological father found guilty, but she was put through hell and taken away from me. No sentence handed down by a judge would be worth what I saw my sister and extended family endure. Protecting everybody else was the best way to protect myself—or so I thought.

*I am eleven when I tell my stepfather that I want to be a model.*

*He says, "Why not practice at home?"*

*It is the weekend and mom is at work again. I rummage through her Avon bag and pull out a couple of tiny sample lipsticks. He picks the darker one. Says it will make me look more grown up. I want to be grown up so I put the lipstick on, and some blue eye shadow—from lashes to eyebrow. I put on a sleeveless white sweater that when it's pulled down off the shoulders*

can double as a mini dress. When I come out I see that he approves of me; except he wipes some of the eye shadow off.

“Too much makeup looks slutty,” he says.

I’m excited as I pose by the sliding glass doors to our balcony. The blinds are pulled across and half shut. I try to look my most mature, my most grown up. After a few pictures I change into jean shorts and a jean vest but no shirt or bra underneath; the no bra being his idea. I figure he knows better than I do what looks best for modeling pictures. I lounge on the folded up couch as he stands by the balcony windows taking pictures and offering commentary on lowering my lashes, pouting my lips, licking them. He tells me to look at the camera like my favorite movie star was the one taking the pictures. I envision Jordan Knight from *New Kids on the Block*.

After a couple more pictures he stops for a minute to kneel by the couch. He slides the vest aside to bare my budding breasts. I’m embarrassed and not sure what to do. So I do nothing. He says he has an idea that will help me have the right facial expression for the pictures. He puts his mouth to one nipple then the other. It feels strange and almost ticklish, like a dog licking my toes. Then it feels good. I relax and he backs away, mostly covering my breasts with the vest. My lips are parted, lashes lowered, and now he says I have the right expression. Click, flash and the photo session is done. I get dressed, clean off the makeup, and then I start to make dinner. Mom will be home soon. He tells me, although I know already that I should not tell her about this. She wouldn’t approve of my modeling dream. Time passes and I never think to ask about the pictures.

The difference between the numbers four and ten is more than six; for me it was the difference between innocent and guilty. My biological father was practically a stranger when a rare window of opportunity permitted his access to me. But with my stepfather things were different. I was encouraged by my mother to submit to him as a way of submitting myself to God. I feared and believed in him as I did in God. As my “daddy” since I was two he was also my friend and confidant. I was curious about so many things and my questions, especially about sex and the body, were met with an open mind. He defended me against my mother when she demanded harsher punishments for the smallest infractions of inconsistent rules. With his attention I felt that I was special, and I did not want to do anything to lose his approval. But the photo shoot was only the beginning. Since my mother worked and my stepfather did not, there was ample opportunity for him to teach me what I was not allowed to learn in school (my mother had refused to let me take the sex-education portion of health class). Over time, his instruction escalated with kissing, masturbation, and the introduction of oral sex: a kind of progression documented in central texts on incest/sexual abuse (Courtois, 1998, p. 28; Herman & Hirschman, 1981, pp. 83-85). As much as an adolescent can, I sympathized with him when he confided in me that my mother spent too much time working outside the

house. He went further to confess that he found her sexually frigid and her lack of self-maintenance appalling. He combined this set of complaints with his “God-given” position as head of the household in order to justify his teaching me so that I would be a better wife for my future husband. I know now that he was a “symbolic rationalizer,” helping me by teaching me what men look for and want in women (Courtois, 1998, p. 49), but at the time I needed to believe that he was good because to believe otherwise would have destroyed my world.

During the period when my stepfather used me as a surrogate wife and I responded as best I could to his needs, I felt needed, loved. If I gave him what he was not getting from my mother he would be happy and stay around, and this would in turn make my mother happier (Herman & Hirschman, 1981, p. 31). I had to keep him with us, for when he went away for months at a time, roles were switched and I became a mom to my own mother. The unifying tie between my mother’s and stepdad’s abuse of me is that both saw and used me as an object. From my earliest years I existed only to reflect what they wanted of me (Miller, 1997, p. 8). This negative mirroring, both relational and developmental, was incorporated into my sense of self (McClure, Chavez, Agars, Peacock, & Matosian, 2007, p. 86) and my identity was effectively constructed around serving others (Newman, 2004, p. 24). Through an unbroken vigilance, sustained by the feeling of God always watching me, I learned how to deny my own needs and be good for both of my parents. I developed what scholars frequently call a “false self” in order to obtain love and approval (Courtois, 1998, p. 125; Croll, 2008, p. 81; Miller, 1997, p. 18).

Years after the photo shoot I reflected on the motivations behind it, my own and my stepfather’s. At the time I was conscious of acting in defiance of my mother and of a vague ambition to be looked at and admired, but the power dynamics and social structures behind this family drama were beyond my comprehension. As an adult I can see that in both my account and the novel *Lolita* there are distinct roles, attitudes, and relational dynamics that support such abuse.

It is easy enough to protest *Lolita*’s innocence by age difference alone. When Humbert first spies *Lolita* she is only ten and he, at 42 years old, has already admitted his lascivious obsession with nymphets between the ages of nine and 14. Humbert claims that it is *Lolita* who initiates vaginal intercourse with him—“it was she who seduced me.” If this weren’t enough he also protests that he is not even her first lover (Nabokov, 1997, p. 132). Humbert’s self-serving defense is exposed as such through his own thoughts and actions. After *Lolita*’s mother dies but before Humbert has apprised *Lolita* of the tragedy, he slips her a sedative in order to molest her in her sleep. When the drug fails he spends a panicked night in bed beside her, licentiously drawn to her restless body, but too anxious to force himself on her. Toward the end of this torturous night, she wakes naturally. “Upon hearing her first yawn, I

feigned handsome, profiled sleep,” Humbert writes (p. 132). He continues to play possum until he is assured that his incriminating proximity has not panicked her. “I gently caressed her hair, and we gently kissed” (p. 133); that is, he crosses the threshold of touch with a disingenuously ambiguous expression of affection, and then transitions over a comma into a sexual touch whose duplicated adjective, “gently” keeps the oncoming sex half-hidden in the platonic connotation. She proposes that they play a game. The game, it turns out, is vaginal intercourse, which she understands as a “stark act” that is “merely part of a youngster’s furtive world, unknown to adults” (p. 133). Humbert implicitly confirms her misapprehension by letting her proceed: “I feigned supreme stupidity and let her have her way – at least while I could still bear it” (p. 134).

This is the crux: Humbert allows Lolita to proceed in the belief that sexual intercourse is a game, with the inconsequentiality that this implies. Unlike her first (age-appropriate) lover, Humbert does not wander off after the exchange. Instead, he undertakes the jealous micromanagement of her life, supporting her in exchange for sexual favors. This is more insidious even than rape, because it leads to a potentially endless series of coerced encounters—it leads, in effect, to slavery. If Lolita initiated their first encounter, she had no idea of its significance. Lolita could not have seduced Humbert, as seductiveness involves the deliberate recasting of oneself as an available sex object, thereby acknowledging and negotiating the social and emotional commitment that adult sexuality presumptively involves.

I realize that as I write, my account adds further weight to the argument for Lolita and myself being victims. However, there is an important difference between the way I see Lolita’s victimization and how other scholars have described her. Those who consider Lolita to be a victim and construct their defense of her character through passivity and weakness (Bordo, 1999; Harad, 2003; Patnoe, 2002) fail to allow for agency or resistance on her part, or the real ambiguity felt by girls who are betrayed by and still defend the people who abuse them. Each time I read the novel I am struck anew at the evidence for Lolita’s agency and existence outside Humbert’s fantasy world. Although the Lolita of the novel is “a ghost in natural colors” (Nabokov, 1997, p. 11) an attuned reader can spy her struggle to maintain agency. Not only does she spend time at a friend’s house to avoid Humbert and her mother, she later uses unattended piano lessons as a means to escape Humbert’s constant manipulations. We get small glimpses of a girl who wants to live a normal life, to go to dances with boys her age, to perform in a school play. When she is forced to rely on Humbert as her only means of support, she submits, but she also makes him pay for her willing performance. And all along, she conspires with Clare Quilty to escape her miserable home life.

All of these responses resonate for me because they are similar to the strategies I used to escape my parents’ emotional and physical manipulations. My best friend’s house was a refuge of normalcy, and my

pursuit of academic excellence and involvement in extracurricular activities provided me with the means to avoid my parents and work toward a brighter future of my own design. The types of resistance that Lolita and I used are often erroneously dismissed as passive, but it is important for society at large to acknowledge these actions for what they are: an active struggle to control one's life.

As a feminist scholar I understand that the use of "victim" to describe women stems from 1970's feminist demands that the extent and seriousness of women's trauma be recognized by lawmakers, politicians and perpetrators of violence. But I also feel that more critically minded scholars (Croll, 2008; Gavey, 1999; Lamb, 1999; Young & Maguire, 2003) rightly point out the problematic nature of the current victimizing discourse on females subjected to sexual violence. Liz Kelly's book, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1996), discusses the concept of "victimism," where victimization becomes the "defining feature of an individual's identity and life experience." This "way of seeing" results in "many facets of a woman's experience being either distorted or unnoticed" (p. 163). The term victim renders invisible the active and positive ways women resist and move on. It also does not allow for feeling pleasure, which reduces the "purity" of the female in question and implicates her in the abuse. They can feel, as I did, that their body was betraying itself (Bass & Thornton, 1991; Daly, 2004; Gavey, 1999; Rambo Ronai, 1995). It is one thing to feel pleasure when intimate touch is invited, but the dissonance caused by pleasure from uninvited touch leaves one in a state of confusion and guilt. Put another way, if pleasure is felt, then where is the crime?

### **Lolita as Seductress**

Even more important than my resistance through physical avoidance was my psychological resistance, if only for the reason that it began long before the sexual abuse and lingered long after. As many subjects of abuse do, I took comfort in thinking that I caused my abusers to behave the way they did. Taking responsibility, even for something bad, is preferable to seeing oneself as powerless or at the mercy of another. My Christian upbringing helped to cultivate this perspective: I was indoctrinated to believe that a good woman did not invite the sexual attention of men while a bad one did. Therefore, if you got that type of attention from men you were doing something to earn it, and you were bad.

So what did that mean for me at 11 years old when my stepfather started seeing me as a sexual object? It meant that I was causing that interest. I did not see that as unreasonable. I had started my period and breast development at 10, and according to my parents I was "mature beyond my years." The fact that I did not consciously invite the attention was irrelevant; there must be something inherently seductive or bad about me. I assumed it must be in my nature to invite that kind of attention. I was potent, powerful, and unable to

be any other way. It was as if I were possessed. If I needed any more proof, all I had to do was remember what had happened with my biological father when I was four. A critically minded person might ask, “What kind of a man would want a four-year-old?” Yet in my 11-year-old mind I framed it as, “What type of four-year-old was I to have enticed a man?” The belief in my seductive nature was reinforced tenfold by the attention of my stepfather. If I had caused such behavior, I must be very powerful indeed.

By the time I reached high school I was aware that there were other “sexy” girls out there, though not aware of Lolita directly. I thought it completely unfair that girls were expected to say “no,” yet boys were free to do as they wanted. I decided that I would do what I pleased with whom I pleased and to hell with anyone who tried to hold me back. I decided to embrace being a “sinner” and accept that, whether I wanted it or not, I had a certain power over men.

My exposure to feminist theory as a college undergraduate did little to modify this self-image. In fact, I used the third-wave feminist aim of sexual empowerment to justify my decision to work as a stripper. Between grants and student loans my basic needs were covered. I did not need to work at all, much less take off my clothes for money. I was drawn by the opportunity to perform. I would be on stage, in the spotlights, commanding attention—in control. They could watch me and want me but would be unable to touch me or force me to do anything. As I entered Nathan A’s I made myself a promise: I was in that strip club because I was comfortable with my sexuality and content with my bodily appearance. If there came a day when that comfort was lost and I started longing for breast implants or other procedures, then that was the day I would quit.

One year later: *The music from my last set fades away as I step off the stage, pull on my favorite plaid schoolgirl skirt and retie my button-down shirt to reveal just the right amount of cleavage. With a final adjustment to my lacy thigh-high stockings I’m ready to hit the floor. The clock on the back wall reads 1:55 A.M., five minutes to closing. I’m tempted to sneak back to the dressing room before the ugly lights come up, but as I scan the room to see if anyone will notice my absence, I see the manager, who is also the owner’s son, watching me. I smile at him and he waves me over. I’m dead tired and worn out from being on my feet all night, but you don’t ignore the owner Doug Sr. or Doug Jr. I carefully weave my way between the remaining inebriated patrons and empty tables toward Doug Jr. As I traverse the room my gaze meets with that of a regular patron, I’ll call him Joe, who has been trying to get me into the VIP room for weeks now.*

*Our VIP room is set up like a living room, dimly lit, with a series of leather chairs with fake trees between them to allow patrons to have more “private” dances from the girls. The room is monitored by cameras, as much for the dancer’s safety as for the club’s protection against illegal activities. Joe nods at me, and I nod back but keep walking with an inward shudder. Joe is*

*middle-aged, well off, and always polite but he gives me the creepy crawlies. Although I can't explain why I feel that way around him, I heed my instincts and avoid him as much as possible. But because he is a friend of the owner I can't ignore him entirely, not if I want to keep my job.*

*I warily approach Doug Jr., worried that I'm in trouble for some unknown infraction of house rules and in for a fine that would reduce my already meager earnings that week. He smiles and asks how my night has been. I yawn and reply that it's been a slow night. He nods understandingly and points to Joe at the bar. My stomach sinks to the tips of my stilettos. I know what's coming, or think I do. When Doug explains that Joe wants a VIP session I point out that it's closing time. Doug Jr. smiles and says that since Joe is a friend of his father's it's OK, and that Joe is willing to pay me extra for my time.*

*My heart thuds like a jackhammer and my mind races for a reasonable excuse. Jr. goes on to explain that the cameras are now shut off and with no other girls present I can do "whatever I feel comfortable with." Understanding the implications of this offer, I look back and forth between Doug Jr. and a confidently waiting Joe. It feels as though a yawning chasm has opened beneath my feet. The first thought that enters my stunned mind is they think I'm a prostitute! The thought of being alone in that space with that man makes me want to vomit. There I am standing in the middle of the club, clothed in one sense, but more naked than I have ever been on stage. In a span of seconds I realize that the way I see myself, my performance, my fierce assertion of owning my body and my sexuality, is nothing more than a sham. All I am to Joe, to the men that still surround me, is a wet hole. In that moment I feel beaten and bloody. I want to cry.*

*My face a careful mask, I calmly look up at Doug Jr. and apologize, saying that I'm unable to give Joe that VIP session because I have a college class in the morning. An easygoing guy, Doug Jr. says that he understands and will pass it on to Joe, but that I might want to consider it another night. I don't have the nerve to look at Joe again as I flee to the safety of the dressing room, but I can feel him watching me. As I put on my street clothes, I know without a doubt my days at that club are numbered. No one says no to one of Doug Sr.'s friends and stays long. The house mom, in collusion with Doug Sr., always finds a way to get those girls to quit. Only when I am safe in my car, with doors locked, do I allow myself to cry. With my head against the steering wheel, I sob with shame.*

*When I first read Nabokov's *Lolita* as a 25-year-old graduate student I brought with me the same perspective that had led me to stripping. I learned from my stepfather and took into the stripping profession the conviction that I was the seductress, not the victim. I still believed that my sexuality gave me power over men. This perspective led me to accept Humbert's skewed version of events at face value. The depiction of *Lolita* as demonic and a force of nature fit with how I perceived myself.*

Because we are forced to see events through Humbert's eyes, there is no way of knowing how Lolita saw herself. What is clear to one with a critical eye is that she adored movie stars and dreamed of fame. On the walls in Lolita's room Humbert finds glossy magazine ads with male figures resembling him. "Lo had drawn a jocose arrow to the haggard lover's face and put in block letters: HH" (Nabokov, 1997, p. 69). Humbert is aware that he resembles some "crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush" (p. 43) and eagerly takes on an "adult disguise," as "a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood" (p. 39). We later find out that the haggard lover and object of Lolita's crush is in fact playwright Clare Quilty. Aware of Lolita's starry ambitions, Humbert fears she will run away to Hollywood or Broadway and he decides to keep her on a short leash.

Like me, Lolita wanted attention, and like me she was encouraged by her mother's behavior to seek validation in the eyes of men. She hones her feminine wiles on a boy at camp and on Humbert but the big catch is Clare Quilty: a younger, more handsome, and more sophisticated version of Humbert. Lolita believes that Quilty is in love with her and that, as a filmmaker/playwright, he is her ticket to stardom. What she doesn't immediately realize is that his films are pornographic. When she balks at performing in one of his films, he kicks her out.

Even as I read *Lolita* and celebrated my seductress status, my ability to get pretty much any man I set my sights on, I struggled valiantly to ignore the past and present consequences of that power. As a 16-year-old emancipated minor, I was free of parental control and made the most of it. When I heard the inevitable badmouthing in the hall at school I dismissed it as jealousy and felt pity for other girls who were so bound by outdated rules. I was doing what they lacked the guts, and perhaps the sexual power, to do. With every successful conquest I was on top of the world. But for every high there was a low. The hold I had on boys never seemed to last, and I had few friends and even fewer female friends. In the lulls between conquests I was overwhelmingly lonely. I had always had the feeling of being on the outside, of being different. Ultimately this level of ostracism took its toll. I would hide in the school bathroom and cry, consoling myself that at least I was not the biggest slut in the school. The worst part of it was that I rarely enjoyed the sex or other acts I performed. I never had an orgasm.

Little changed when I worked as a stripper: I did not, would not, sleep with patrons, but the sense of isolation, the cyclical highs and lows remained with me. The longer I worked at Nathan A's the more potent my depression became. On many nights I would come home to my live-in boyfriend and recoil from his touch, seeing in him all of the creeps I dealt with at work. My self-image slowly warped and where I had once been content with my 36C breasts, I now pondered how much more money I might make with bigger ones. The invitation for an after-hours VIP session was a wake-up call. I could stay and pretend that what I did was for me and that I had my own power,

but the truth was that any power I had on the stage, on the floor of the club, did not come from within. The real power was held by those who gazed on me and determined my worth by paying me with cash or attention. I began to understand that if they could give it they could take it away. That there is power of a sort in granting or withholding sex is undeniable; the question is not whether power exists, but to whose advantage it works.

A case in point is Katie Roiphe's 1998 *Vogue* article titled, "The End of Innocence." The main purpose of the article is to advocate the "unusual balance of power" that Roiphe discovered through her affair at 16 with a man who was 20 years her senior. The sub-heading declares that, "Lolita-like affairs are not always about a predatory man and victimized girl" (p. 38). Roiphe claims to be a third-wave feminist, and as such, she revels in the reclaiming of sex and sexuality formerly ruled by men and then by prudish second-wave feminists. In her article she links the "blossoming" of her "feminine power" to her ability to attract and bargain with an older man, a former school teacher. She points out the culture's obsession with girls labeled as Lolitas, how she saw herself in the media/fashion depiction of sexualized girls, and how she deliberately took on the role to exert sexual power. Ultimately, she claims that the relationship was more of a rite of passage than a form of abuse. But near the end of her account are the clues that provide the undoing to her purely empowered narrative. She hints at, but refuses to delve into, the physical and emotional aftereffects of that relationship.

I understand the compulsion to cast an abusive situation in a different light, to cast oneself as the person in control. But what Roiphe's sexually empowered narrative of Lolita omits is an awareness of age and gendered power dynamics. Roiphe leaves unacknowledged that at 16 few girls are conscious of, much less able to articulate, what desire is and how to pursue genuine fulfillment through an equal and mature relationship (Driscoll, 2002). However, age alone does not rectify the imbalance of power: one only has to consider the multi-billion dollar beauty industrial complex to see that females of all ages (even those who identify as transgendered) are encouraged to devote their time and energy toward getting and keeping the approval of men (Wolf, 1991).

Roiphe's wishful thinking does not change gendered reality. Just because a woman says she's free of patriarchy and "old" feminist limitations on desire does not mean that she indeed operates in a world where patriarchy and its hegemonic functions do not exist. To deny that she operates within such a structure serves to make the structure less visible and therefore winds up reinforcing it. The empowered Lolita is ultimately subservient to patriarchal values—this strain of discourse reduces its subscribers to pouring all their energy into currying the favor of men. Moreover, by foregrounding the illusion of empowerment through sexuality, this strain of discourse leaves the consequences of self-objectification in the dark. For these reasons, I find the empowered Lolita as problematic as I do the victim Lolita.

## Escaping a Self-Destructive Narrative

Through watching the titular films and analyzing Nabokov's *Lolita* from my own lived perspective (as opposed to Humbert's perspective), I am now able to see both the symbolic significance and material consequence of Lolita's demise. She escapes being a sexual slave to Humbert, escapes further objectification by Quilty, but in the end she does not escape societal expectations of womanhood. Soon after leaving Quilty she finds another man, becomes pregnant, and dies in childbirth at 17. Such an ending provides a final affirmation of her femininity as a sacrificial mother. Through connecting my experiences with those of Lolita I discovered that the dominant discourses of victim/seductress left me nowhere to go or, more accurately, would take me to an end I did not want. But what does one do when a narrative breaks down or no longer serves one well? Christine Kiesinger (2002) believes that we should "actively reinvent our accounts in ways that permit us to live more fulfilling lives" (p. 107). To escape the confines of a particular story one needs to understand the story itself, how it draws people in and positions one in its terms.

The competing and overlapping discourses around Lolita effectively categorize her as rare, aberrant, damaged in some way—as individually pathological and individually responsible. Yet images and accounts of Lolita are prevalent not because she deviates from social norms but because both strains of the narrative support the social construction of gender and its compulsory performance. In short, Lolita is an avatar for our present construction of femininity. The ubiquity of the Lolita archetype, of the prepubescent seductress and/or passive victim, encourages females to conceive of themselves as instruments. To live as a Lolita means both living in fear of victimization and refraining from full embodiment (owning sexuality), or using one's body/ sexuality as an instrument to garner approval. These "choices" may not be the sum total of femininity but they certainly express the double-bind that many females find themselves in when directed to act in a gender appropriate manner.

Although girls and boys are socialized differently almost from birth, it is during adolescence that psychological necessity and culture crash head-on. As adolescent girls work to achieve biological and sexual maturation, develop a personal and a sexual identity, develop intimate sexual relationships with peers, develop abstract thinking, reassess their body image, and establish independence and autonomy (Kroger, 1996; Moore & Rosenthal, 1993), they must also contend with the increasing pressure to submerge unacceptable drives and pursuits related to personal career ambitions, intellectualism, personal assertiveness, and competitive physical activity. The drives and pursuits that feminine socialization compels women to repress are precisely those that are most associated with, and most necessary for, the independent and autonomous satisfaction of wants and needs. Presenting the acceptable

aspects of the self and suppressing what is not is a part of socialization for everyone (Goffman, 1959), but girls are put at a grievous disadvantage because adolescence brings for them the expectation that they cease to be the subjects of their own lives and become the object of others' lives (Simone de Beauvoir, as cited in Pipher, 1994, p. 22). To the extent that a female "succeeds" in repressing her autonomy, she needs someone else to act and speak for her even when she speaks to herself (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2003, p. 195). Girls who leave behind necessary elements of a healthy personality not only risk leaving the self-integrating project of adolescence perpetually incomplete, they may also permanently lose traits like assertiveness and ambition, traits that their cultural environment compels them to suppress.

To the extent that women embody the feminine ideal, they are not allowed to be adults (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1970). Competent and potentially competent girls/women must become incompetent to succeed in the compulsory performance of femininity. An unnatural performance requires strict monitoring of the self (Foucault, 1997), and this causes women to become alienated both from the traits they suppress and the traits they are influenced to manifest. The allocation of mental energy to self-monitoring, and the resulting self-alienation, deprives women/girls of both the energy and the incentive to develop competency as a self-actualizing agent. This unremitting inculcation of femininity constitutes biopsychosocial abuse affecting those subject to it on three integrated and mutually reinforcing levels: physical health, mental/emotional health, and social interaction.

The image of the self as instrumental distorts women's sense of themselves and of their relationships to others, compounds sexual exploitation with self-blame, and replaces sound concepts of what is healthy, sexy, or praiseworthy with notions of what is useful or pleasing to others (Driscoll, 2002; Wolf, 1991). Lolita's central vulnerability is her dependence on the opinions of men. A Lolita has deferred her prerogative of self-definition to men's capacity to define her according to their own priorities. Rather than rely on her own self-image, she relies on men to supply one for her. If she simpers, if she dresses provocatively, these are bribes paid to improve the man's opinion of her; he is a sentient mirror, and, as he is the primary source of self-knowledge she will credit, she will stop at nothing to persuade him to reflect her favorably. To a Lolita, the approving gaze is like a beam of light that, if ever dimmed, switched off, or merely turned away, will maroon her in an introspective blackout. A Lolita cannot just cultivate a Humbert's approval, adopt it as her own self-image, and walk away; she has to reside in it continually, and this means she must continually pander to him in any way that will draw his glance.

As I see it, the best weapon against the damage of compulsory femininity and the appeal of the Lolita narratives is "the discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth of each individual" (Miller, 1997, p. 21). In my case, I had to discover and accept that I had been abused and betrayed by those

who were supposed to protect me. Critically examining my identification with Lolita is what truly began my discovery process. With the realization that Lolita was sexually abused by her stepfather, I was able to acknowledge and accept that both my father and stepfather had abused me. At that point, and only then, was I able to intellectually and emotionally accept that I had been a victim, that criminal acts were committed against me.

This insight brought forth anxiety, nightmares, and tears. It also led me to the next step, realizing that even though I was victimized, I was not without agency. When faced with the choice of being powerless and damaged or empowered and ostracized, I adopted the discourse that gave me a greater portion of autonomy. As an adolescent and college undergraduate, I believed that because my body belonged to me, and because I had inverted the typical predator/prey power dynamic by pursuing males exclusively for sex, I was in control of myself and my sexuality. Yet now I see how the exploitation of my own sexuality to acquire power implies that my power was received from males. My initiative was vitiated by my own self-defeating motivation and by the social consequences of female promiscuity.

In accepting the truth and consequences of my abuse I am able to reframe my experiences and place the responsibility where it belongs, on my abusers. I hold not only my family accountable, but also the broader society in which I live. Rather than being refuted and repudiated by society, my father's/stepfather's treatment of me was supported by gendered ideologies and masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001) in American culture. In my case, and in the case of many abuse victims, abuse was/is an extension of feminization (Bass & Thornton, 1991; Croll, 2008; Daly, 2004; Herman & Hirschman, 1981; Kelly, 1996). With newfound clarity I was and am able to see that my identity is not a choice of either/or but both/and. I can acknowledge *both* my agency *and* victimization without being reduced to just one or the other.

In my quest to redefine both my abuse experiences and my sense of self, I have worked through what Croll (2008) calls a "reflexive transformation." She describes the transformation as, "a circular process of engendering awareness and fostering regeneration that is consistently directed back upon itself" (p. 15). As I became more aware of the limitations and damage done through "living Lolita" I decided that I would henceforth be the author of my own narrative. I mean this in both a tangible sense, through writing an autoethnographic account of "living Lolita;" and an intangible sense, by taking in what enhances my agency and self-actualization and refusing what limits my development as a human being. This kind of transformation is not a one-time process but a continuous life-long cycle with self-reflection at the center.

I willingly admit that I am not free of all effects of the abuse I suffered, nor am I free from social expectations of femininity. I write knowing that I will always be affected by the familial conditions that shaped me. I cannot and do not wish to deny those experiences, for while they are painful, they

are valuable. To be clear, I would not wish such abuse on others, but I would not be the critically minded scholar I am without the experiences that shaped me. I value my sensitivity to power dynamics, my concern for social justice, and the compassion I feel for others with similar experiences. Without the abuse I experienced and my self-reflexive and re-framing journey I would not be able to see the simple common thread that links my experience of femininity to that of other women around me. This is not to say that all girls/women experience or are limited by femininity the same way, but that to some degree we all struggle with authenticity in the face of social structures that favor seeming over being.

## Conclusion

Through critical autoethnography I am able to connect the micro (personal experience) with the macro (cultural messages/expectations) with the ultimate aim of changing both my life and my broader social environment for the better. In critiquing the discourses around Lolita specifically, I make it clear that my experiences are not rare or on the periphery of society but are central and damaging.

Of all that I gain through the practice of self-reflection and social critique, I value most my ability to be a scholar, wife and mother; to give of myself without sacrificing myself. It is my hope that through sharing my struggles, hard-won insights, and triumphs, I will inspire others to be more critical of cultural narratives like Lolita that limit their capacity to thrive. Because both strains of the Lolita narrative appropriate preferred meanings of femininity by repressing more complex alternatives of autonomy, there is a need to seriously question identifications with Lolita and if at all possible to relocate narrative agency. Just as subjects of sexual abuse can reclaim their bodies, their voices, and their lives, so can women who have been abused by their culture. This reclamation and “reflexive transformation” should begin by revisiting and reframing our cultural conception that physical, mental, and social health is tied to gender. As a woman I am most concerned with the continued incommensurability of what constitutes a healthy woman and a healthy adult, but I also acknowledge the necessity of challenging the limitations of masculinity. Therefore, the ultimate goal of scholars and those dissatisfied with gendered limitations should be to construct a healthy way of being in the world that is applicable to all human beings.

## References

- Bass, E., & Thornton, L. (1991). *I never told anyone: Writings by women survivors of child sexual abuse*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Bordo, S. (1999). *The male body: A new look at men in public and in private*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Broverman, I.K., Broverman, D., Clarkson, F., Rosenkrantz, P, & Vogel, S. (1970). Sex-role stereotypes and clinical judgments of mental health. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 34(3), 1-7.
- Courtois, C. (1998). *Healing the incest wound: Adult survivors in therapy*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Croll, M.C. (2008). *Following sexual abuse: A sociological interpretation of identity re-formation in reflexive therapy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Daly, B. (2004). When the daughter tells her story: The rhetorical challenges of disclosing father-daughter incest. In C. Shearer-Creman & C. L. Winkelmann (Eds.), *Survivor rhetoric: Negotiations and narrativity in abused women's language* (pp. 139-165). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Driscoll, C. (2002). *Girls: Feminine adolescence in popular culture & cultural theory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Durham, G. (2008). *The Lolita effect: The media sexualization of young girls and what we can do about it*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., and Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, 36(4), 273-290.
- Foucault, M. (1997). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Gavey, N. (1999). "I wasn't raped, but...": Revisiting definitional problems in sexual victimization. In S. Lamb (Ed.), *New versions of victims: Feminists struggle with the concept* (pp. 57-81). New York: New York University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Goodall, H. L. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Harad, A. (2003). Reviving Lolita; Or, because junior high is still hell. In R. Dicker & A. Piepmeier (Eds.), *Catching a wave: Reclaiming feminism for the 21st century* (pp. 81-98). Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Herman, J., & Hirschman, L. (1981). *Father-daughter incest*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hertz, R. (1997). *Reflexivity & voice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kiesinger, C. (2002). My father's shoes: The therapeutic value of narrative reframing. In C. Ellis & A. Bochner (Eds.), *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (pp. 95-114). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Kelly, L. (1996). *Surviving sexual violence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kroger, J. (1996). *Identity in adolescence: The balance between self and other* (2nd ed.) London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Kubrick, S. (Director). (1962). *Lolita* [Motion picture] United States: MGM.
- Lamb, S. (1999). Constructing the victim: Popular images and lasting labels. In S. Lamb (Ed.), *New versions of victims: Feminists struggle with the concept* (pp. 108-138). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Lolita. (1998). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.
- Lyne, A. (Director). (1997). *Lolita* [Motion picture]. United States: Pathé.

- McClure, F., Chavez, D., Agars, M., Peacock, J., & Matosian, A. (2007). Resilience in sexually abused women: Risk and protective factors. *Journal of Family Violence*, 23, 81-88.
- Mendes, S. (Director). (1999). *American Beauty* [Motion picture]. United States: DreamWorks SKG.
- Miller, A. (1997). *Drama of the gifted child: The search for the true self*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Moore, S., & Rosenthal, D. (1993). *Sexuality in adolescence*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nabokov, V. (1997). *Lolita* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Vintage.
- Newman, E. (2004). "Narrative, Gender, and Recovery from Childhood Sexual Abuse." In C. Shearer-Creman & C. L. Winkelmann (Eds.), *Survivor rhetoric: Negotiations and narrativity in abused women's language* (pp. 23-41). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Patnoe, E. (2002). Discourse, ideology, and hegemony: The double dramas in and around Lolita. In D. H. J. Larmour (Ed.), *Discourse and ideology in Nabokov's prose* (pp. 111-136). London: Routledge.
- Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York, NY: Ballantine.
- Rambo Ronai, C. (1995). Multiple reflections of child sex abuse: An argument for a layered account. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 23(1), 395-426.
- Rambo Ronai, C. (1997). Discursive constraint in the narrated identities of childhood sex abuse. In C. Rambo Ronai, B. Zsembik, & J. Feagin (Eds.), *Everyday sexism in the third millennium* (pp. 123-136). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Roiphe, K. (1998, January). The end of innocence. *Vogue*, 188(1), 38-46.
- Scorsese, M. (Director). (1976). *Taxi Driver* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia.
- Shapiro, A. dir. (1993). *The Crush* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.
- Stringer-Hye, S. (2002). Vladimir Nabokov and popular culture. In D. H. J. Larmour (Ed.), *Discourse and ideology in Nabokov's prose* (pp. 150-159). London: Routledge.
- Thomas, J. (1993). *Doing critical ethnography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Thomas, J. (2003). Musings on critical ethnography, meanings and symbolic violence. In R. P. Clair (Ed.), *Expressions of ethnography: Novel approaches to qualitative methods* (pp. 45-54). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Young, S., & Maguire, K. (2003). Talking about sexual violence. *Women and Language*, 26(2), 40-52.
- Zimmer-Gembeck, M., & Collins, W.A. (2003). Autonomy development during adolescence. In G. R. Adams & M. D. Berzonsky (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence* (pp. 175-204). Malden, MA: Blackwell.