Without Closets: A Queer and Feminist Re-imagining of Narratives of Queer Experience

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Introduction

Coming out is messy stuff. The first time I told someone I was bisexual, I was thirteen years old. The first time I told anyone I was queer, I was nineteen. The first time I told my parents I was queer and introduced them to a girlfriend, I was twenty. This version of the story skips over the part when my mother stumbled upon a blog post of mine in which I’d referred to myself as queer, and the ensuing awkward conversation and six months of radio silence on the subject. Is this my coming out story? During most of the process I felt neither proud, nor afraid. There never was a closet, and I never took a step from dark to light. Like much of life, this period of “coming out” was exciting or dull, changing day to day, and I only came to view much of it as significant in hindsight. The sound-byte version I tell when asked about my coming out has little to do the actual experience of it. Why, I wondered, does the paradigm of coming out dominate our cultural understanding of gay experience? Was I the only one for whom it did not ring true?

Experience tells me that coming out is simultaneously a cultural touchstone and site of bonding for many LGBTQ folks, and a formulaic narrative that a wide variety of queer experience is squeezed and contorted to fit within. The closet is both a useful way of understanding and connecting a diversity of queer life events, and a fiction. To investigate the roles that this narrative plays in the lives of my peers, I interviewed young queer-, bi-, lesbian- and gay-identifying women about their experiences with sexual identity to examine how coming out narratives might or might not reflect and structure their understandings of their identities and
experiences. In the process, I realized that I was not really researching coming out stories at all. Indeed, the stories I was hearing often bore little resemblance to the archetypal coming-out story, and yet no language exists in common usage to characterize these queer stories.

In this paper, I will search for other possible structures of understanding with which these women may be engaging. Using theoretical structures and tools provided to me by queer theory and contemporary feminism, my project examines coming out, queer disclosures, and the navigation of queer visibility among my peers. While I will discuss the traditional coming out story and the role it plays in these women’s lives, the more interesting question is how these women are already crafting alternative narratives. I argue that my subjects are engaging not (just) in coming out, but in queer alignment, a process that moves narratives away from the realm of identity, and toward a queerness based in experience and change. My queer alignment intervention into coming out discourse is centered on two main parts: a queer temporality, which resists the lock-step timeline of coming out by shifting valuation toward in-between moments, and a queer visibility, a tactic that turns toward non-verbal ways of expressing identity and seeks to express the nuances of the queer self in ways that words cannot.

The subject of coming out and related narratives has been largely neglected by critical queer and feminist theory in recent years. Coming-out narratives have not been a popular subject of study in queer and feminist critical thought since the 1990s, when queer theory was nascent.

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1 I have chosen to interview only women for a few reasons. First of all, much of the literature on LGBTQ people has focused on gay men, and as a feminist scholar I am choosing to study women in order to resist the notion that research on gay men can be generalized to apply to all LGBTQ lives. It is important to create space to represent the incredibly diverse range of women’s experiences. Furthermore, women’s sexual agency and abilities to desire fiercely and openly have been denied again and again in Western history. Even today, women are more often regarded (and at times regard themselves) as sexual objects, rather than sexual actors. Women’s non-normative sexualities are also more likely to be dismissed as “just a phase” or appropriated for male desire. Therefore, as a researcher committed to a queer approach, I believe that giving women a space to negotiate and describe their sexual experiences on their own terms and in their own words is a radical, and valuable, act.
and feminist studies was in the throes of a decades-long upheaval. Interventions from women of color feminism beginning in the 1970s and 80s, and more recent interventions from queer theory have disrupted the homogenizing discourses of female and lesbian experience presented by mainstream white feminist and gay rights movements, and, in the process, frequently rejected or criticized coming out as a relevant paradigm. I have observed that coming out is still a concept that is very much used by my peers to understand and navigate their queer identities and experiences, as well as a large part of dominant queer narratives portrayed in the media. It cannot, therefore, be written off altogether. Yet it surely cannot provide our only way of understanding the queer experiences it purports to encompass.

The cultural landscape has greatly changed for many LGBTQ people in America since the 90s. Ever-greater numbers of visible gay, lesbian and bisexual figures are gaining platforms in the national media; gay marriage is becoming legalized in new states each year; a new wave of trans* public figures are bringing the realities of their lives into the spotlight and introducing more diverse narratives of gender to popular awareness; and statistics show that today’s young people, more than any generation in our culture’s collective memory, view gay sexuality as normal and acceptable.² Make no mistake, we are not living in a queer utopia, and these positive changes do not equally impact people across the spectrums of race and class. Still, it is evident that the times are rapidly changing, and I, and others my age, will likely grow into a queer adulthood that is unique to our generation. We will have our own questions to answer, our own struggles and joys. A queer, feminist project specific to the narratives of millennials can help unearth situated knowledges specific to queer folks coming of age in today’s world.

² For one example of the many studies showing changing attitudes toward LGBTQ people in America, see below: Alison Keleher and Eric R. A. N. Smith, “Growing Support for Gay and Lesbian Equality Since 1990,” Journal of Homosexuality 59.9 (2012), 1307-1326.
Claiming a queerness

In the writing of this paper, questions of terminology have arisen again and again. This is because queer is, necessarily and intentionally, a slippery word. Its definition is elusive, its uses many. In this paper, I will use the term queer in two inextricably connected ways: queer as a way of being/becoming, and queer as a way of understanding/reading. The first usage centers on personal experience and the ways that individuals and communities operate in the world, self-identify, and relate to each other and themselves. The second usage centers on the scholarly tradition, queer theory, that guides my approach to the material I am analyzing. Although these two meanings may appear distinct from one another, it is no coincidence that they are bound up in the same word, as queer individuals, queer communities, queer scholars, and queer scholarship engage in an ongoing flow of exchange. The scholarship from which I will take my definition, loose as it may be, of the word queer, is that of a relatively recent turn in queer theory toward a critical optimism centered on queer becoming. As E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen write in the introduction to Queer Times, Queer Becomings, “Queer theory’s involvement with time signals its persistent speculation in questions of becoming as the process of unforeseeable change. With the notion of queerness strategically and critically posited not as as identity or a substantive mode of being but as a way of becoming, temporality is necessarily always bound up in the queer.” The concept of queerness as a mode of temporality/becoming is useful in the context of this paper, which centers itself squarely on moments of queer becoming, and seeks to describe the ways in which these processes may not be predictable or clear-cut -- indeed, for

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many of the women I interviewed, queerness is experienced as an “unforeseeable change,” as it changes them in unexpected ways. While queer theory and queer experience illuminate and inform each other in many ways, the critical distinctions between the two crystallize around the question of identity.

Queer theory has historically defined itself as an anti-identitarian politic. This has proven to be rich theoretical ground for many thinkers and scholars. However, the anti-identitarian tendency of queer theory appears to leak out as queerness spreads to an everyday matter of being, becoming, and self-naming. If we were to understand queerness only from scholarship, the phrase “I identify as queer” would appear to be oxymoronic. And yet many people, including myself and many of my participants, not to mention so many of my friends, peers, and role models, name ourselves exactly in this way. In fact, the question of what “identifying as queer” could possibly mean was one of the questions that lead me to this project. This question can, and should, never be answered neatly, but it helps to turn to a definition provided by Eve Sedgwick: “Queer” refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren't made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (emphasis Sedgwick’s).

4 As Darnell L. Moore describes, “Quite literally, queer theory is a theoretical project that is shaped by the critical insights of philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler (among others) who criticized structuralist paradigms by calling into question the limiting and rigid notion of conceptual structures (i.e., binary oppositions and its reinforcement of the sign/signifier/signified dynamic) imposed by and evidenced through language, discourse, and law.” This anti-identitarian impulse in queer theory, often tied to an anti-social impulse described by writers such as Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, has been a site for racial critiques by scholars such as Moore, who writes, “What is the utility of disidentification and anti-identity for the lives of those whose white racial identities always enable their movement as unmarked and, therefore, always already privileged in their claim for an anti- and disidentity?” As I will describe, many queer scholars have moved toward a queer utopian turn that refutes many of anti-social and anti-identitarian theses on grounds other than race, but racial critiques such as Moore’s are an important part of the landscape of this turn. Darnell L. Moore, “Structurelessness, Structure, and queer Movements,” *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 41 (2013), 258-9.

understanding of queerness allows for the possibility of something that is reminiscent of identity, but not quite -- a self-naming that is never perfectly calibrated, and always allows room for evolution and reformulation. Such an understanding forms the basis of my queer alignment model.

Queer alignment suggests that “being queer” does not have to be an identity -- it may function in a subtly but stubbornly different way. The description of queerness that haunts me most persistently, and informs most deeply my practice of queerness both as a queer scholar and a queer individual, is José Esteban Muñoz’s in Cruising Utopia: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer...queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world...[It is] a backward glance that enacts a future vision.”6 Together, Muñoz and Sedgwick, along with McCallum’s and Tuhkanen’s conception of queerness as “unforeseeable change,”7 begin to shape a formulation of queerness that exists as it is applied -- it is a shifting manner of being and becoming, of existing and thinking. To move oneself toward or with queerness, then, is perhaps not an identity, but an alignment. The concept of alignment allows for an understanding of queerness that is less rigid than identity, and does not bear the expectation (as identity does) of stability over time. Different circumstances may draw forth different communities, concepts and histories with which we align ourselves, and these shifts are not duplicitous, but are rather situational positioning or evolution. Queer alignment may also signify

moments of being slightly misaligned (aligned *queerly*) with normative expectations -- moments of stepping off a normative timeline, dressing away from one’s gender, bending the limiting terminology to better describe or express oneself. Therefore, although my participants differ in their identities (bisexual, gay, dyke, lesbian, queer), they all described to me moments of queer alignment, and these moments of queerness are what I will describe in this paper.

I do not mean to suggest with my use of the term alignment a mode of being that may be confined within straight lines -- rather I envision the act of aligning oneself along a curve. Such a model suggests the ways that our identifications, self-namings, communities and politics shift constantly and subtly. Queer alignment allows one to roll along these curves with greater freedom than identity categories typically grant. By understanding queerness through a curved model of alignment, one can remain skeptical of the binding and often essentializing nature of identity politics, while recognizing that shared names and terminologies are not only inevitable but necessary to the survival of communities -- particularly historically and systematically oppressed communities. Seeing oneself in others, being seen in return, and naming this shared seeing is not trivial - it may in fact be necessary to the survival of queer people. By alighting on a shared name (queerness), while subverting the expectation that the group signified by this term will be constant throughout time or have definitive borders and boundaries, alignment moves away from the aspects of identity so fervently resisted by many queer scholars, while maintaining the allegiance to the feminist principle that community is vital and necessary. Alignment therefore pinpoints a specifically queer/feminist politic.

It is important to note that the meaning of the word *queer* has changed as it has entered common usage from the scholarly world. More and more, it has been taken as a simple substitute
for lesbian, gay or bisexual. Queerness’ rejection of categories, its rebelliousness, and its slipperiness can be found in these claims, but the potency of these theoretical meanings in common usage varies. However, although the term queer is evolving, I believe that when this term is used in acts of self-description, it still implies an anti-normative impulse, and often reflects the speaker’s desire to resist or subvert normative categories of gender and sexuality. Therefore, although the word queer may have somewhat different meanings when used in different contexts, these meanings cannot be cleanly split. In this paper, I will at times use the word gay as a gender-neutral term to describe non-normative sexualities to avoid confusion between identities and theoretical groundings. I have done my best to reflect the meanings that my participants described to me when using the word queer to describe themselves, and respect the other terminologies that they employed.

By asking my subjects about coming out stories and about their continued experiences navigating queer visibility, I was really asking about time, and about their ways of being, queerly, in time. When, I asked, did you become queer? When did you know it? When did you say it? How do you reconcile your past and future selves in moments of correction, flirtation, revelation? These stories are uniquely situated in time, as well -- our experiences with outness change all the time, and the same participant interviewed a few months later might have had different stories to tell. It is no wonder that sharing coming out stories is such a popular pastime for groups of queer people. This is a trope that clearly has staying power, and, also clearly, limitations. Like the proverbial closet, the coming out narrative is a constrained space, and in this paper I will explore both its depth and what lies beyond its walls.
**Interview Methodology**

I conducted interviews between October 2012 and December 2013, and my interview methods evolved during that time as my project gained focus. I audio-recorded my interviews for transcription purposes. My interview participants consisted mostly of friends, acquaintances, and friends of friends, and I contacted them through direct invitation, word-of-mouth, and by emailing campus organizations. During interviews, I used an open-ended method that allowed room for the terms of the discussion to be largely guided by my participants. I began each interview by asking when the participant first began to identify as queer, gay, bisexual, etc., making it clear that they should use whatever terminology they wished. Some of my participants had begun to identify as queer years earlier, while for others it was a more recent event -- these timelines informed my choice of questions. Questions I asked participants generally focused on how they identified themselves, when and why they arrived at this identity, and episodes of disclosure of their sexual identity to others, and how they navigated the visibility of their identity (see Appendix for a list of sample questions).

I avoided directly framing the participant’s experiences as “coming out” unless the participant used that terminology. Because my aim was to trouble the dominant coming-out paradigm, and because this paradigm is so well-known and salient that it has the power to bend almost any story about queerness and visibility to its form, I realized that the diversity of stories participants shared increased dramatically when I stopped introducing the phrase “coming out” early in the interview. Throughout, I paid close attention to the terminology that my participants used to describe themselves. For some participants, the term they identified with most was not the same one they used to describe themselves to, for example, their parents. How have terms
such as queer, gay, lesbian and dyke gained such different charges, and how might shifting between terms that may be more or less palatable to others be a sort of visibility move? How do generational differences shape some of these interactions? These, and others, are questions that I devised through careful attention to the issues raised by my participants.

I have generally tried to match my characterization of the participants’ gender and sexual identities in this paper with their self-professed identities. Therefore, I have used each participants’ declared preferred pronouns. In instances when I risk mis-gendering someone, I use the pronouns “they/them/theirs,” sometimes in the singular. Although this is not in agreement with formal grammatical rules and may sound awkward at times, the English language lacks a satisfying, universal set of non-gendered singular pronouns. As I wish to be respectful of all my participants’ identities, “they/them/theirs” is often my best option. I have assigned pseudonyms to all of my interviewees, as well as all friends and family members mentioned in interviews. I have tried to make sure that these pseudonyms roughly match gendered and cultural characteristics of the participant’s real name. Overall, I have tried my hardest over the course of this paper to ensure that my writing and treatment of the stories of my participants reflect my respect for these women and their experiences. I am so grateful that friends, acquaintances and strangers have entrusted me to write about their lives, and I do not take the responsibility of doing so lightly.

A Note On Race

I believe that it is a scholar’s duty to acknowledge the limitations of one’s project. Throughout my process, I have struggled with the question of representation in this paper. I never aimed to
write a paper representing all queer women -- no one project ever could. As women of color feminists have reminded white feminists and queer writers, such as myself, we must always be critical of who our projects claim to represent, and be especially wary of generalizing from a position of whiteness. Ultimately, this project has greatly come to reflect my own identities, centering largely (though not exclusively) on white and middle-class participants. My methods of reaching participants heavily drew on the mostly white circles of which I am a part. Furthermore, because Oberlin is an expensive private college, the culture of the school is largely dominated by an upper-middle-class ethos, and the middle class is overrepresented in my work. Probably because of this, race and class were not topics that came up nearly enough in my interviews -- it is all too easy for a middle-class white subject to see herself as race-less and class-less. Although I tried to reach out to participants through student groups with diverse memberships, I did not find many participants this way. I perhaps hesitated to push further with these attempts because I was wary of trying to speak for women of color and working class or poor women. There is a shameful history of white writers “speaking for” people of color, and exploiting the stories of people of color for their own gain. I did not wish to add to this history, and my trepidation about speaking for people of color made me hesitant to insert myself into POC-centric spaces to which I have no claim in order to search for participants. As I drew closer to my final project, I was also wary of tokenizing a few participants of color by inserting them in my paper to disguise a general lack of diversity.

Ultimately, I am probably not the right scholar to describe the specific ways that intersectional identities shape queerness for women of color, working class or poor women, disabled women, women with mental illness, and other marginalized groups. While some of my
participants identify as some or all of the above, for the most part these identities were not
openly discussed in my interviews. This may be in part because I am white and middle class and
did not explicitly center my project on minority identities beyond queerness, and therefore
participants may have been more hesitant to bring up subjects related to other identities. As a
young scholar, I have learned the valuable lesson that, because of my position, I must integrate
my intersectional aspirations into my planning much earlier and more intentionally in future
projects. For now, I hope that queer women of color and members of other groups I have
mentioned will engage my work in dialogue and bring to light a greater diversity of stories.

**A Brief History of Coming Out**

In order to displace the coming out paradigm from its position of dominance in queer discourse,
one must first historicize it. While it is unclear exactly when or how the metaphor of “coming out
of the closet” came to dominate discourse on the declaration of one’s non-normative sexual
identity, this framework has since moved through western (specifically American) culture in a
way that is traceable. In order to understand the ways that the coming out paradigm operates in
today’s world, it is important to piece together a working knowledge of how this framework rose
to dominance, what its role has been over time within mainstream culture and feminist and
LGBTQ movements, and the criticisms that it has received. A complete history of coming out
could be a fascinating book of its own, but here I will be brief.

In 1971, *Newsweek* stated that “gay liberation burst from the closet, demanding equal
rights and society’s approval.”  

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8 *Newsweek* magazine, quoted by Barbara Hunt Lazerson, “In and out of the Closet,” *American Speech* 56.4 (1981),
277.
held strong in the mainstream feminist, gay and lesbian movements throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In a 1984 review of collections of lesbian writings, Bonnie Zimmerman summed up the ethos of the era: that “speaking, especially naming oneself ‘lesbian,’ is an act of empowerment....Powerlessness, on the other hand, is associated with silence and the ‘speechlessness’ that the powerful impose on those dispossessed of language.”

Numerous anthologies of coming out stories were published during this time, positing that the simple act of sharing these stories widely would benefit LGBTQ people as a whole. One such anthology, published in 1978 by Nancy and Casey Adair and titled *Word is Out*, compiles transcribed first-person narratives of the life stories of gay men and lesbians that were originally recorded for a documentary of the same title. In the prologue, Casey Adair identifies a “longer-term goal” of the gay rights movement to “point to the reality that homosexuals are human beings” in order to fight homophobia. Another example of these anthologies, *The Original Coming Out Stories*, edited by Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe and published in 1980, compiles short coming-out stories written by lesbians. In the introduction, Penelope and Wolfe state that their book “exists because wimmin love wimmin,...in spite of persistent denials from our culture that Lesbianism is real.”

These texts, both published in an era when there was little public support for LGBT rights, justify their existence as a visibility move.

While the idealistic but perhaps naive white-dominated lesbian feminist move celebrated the power of the coming out story, women of color feminist scholars and activists during the

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1970s and 1980s protested the white-centrism of mainstream feminism and forged other feminisms and womanisms. This ongoing intervention has caused a much-needed upheaval within feminist and gay/lesbian thought. Scholars and activists of color such as Cathy Cohen have criticized the white-centrism of gay and lesbian scholarship and activism for seeking acceptance in the straight world, at the expense of queers of color and poor queer folks, who experience multiple oppressions that go unrecognized by the mainstream movement. In “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens,” Cohen calls for a “new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality.”

Racial critiques were joined by a queer theory intervention, with texts such as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, both published in 1990, often cited as foundational to the movement. Both women of color feminisms and queer theory provided criticisms of the dominance of the coming out paradigm and the ways in which it was being employed by the dominant feminist and gay movements.

From its very beginnings, queer theory has engaged with and challenged the notion of the closet and the coming-out act as a central component of life for gay people. A foundational text of queer theory, Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* examines the operations of homosexual identity and the workings of the closet during the twentieth century. Sedgwick insists that sexuality (specifically the nexus of sexuality related to object-choice, or the hetero/homosexual binary) has been put in “privileged relation” to our greater notions of identity and truth, and thus “the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and

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relations by which we know.”

Sedgwick troubles the modern notion that object choice is the single most important and defining marker of a person’s sexuality and insists that the few axes of identity on which we focus our studies (race, class, gender, nationality and sexual orientation) are insufficient to map the breadth of human experience. Sedgwick’s critique marks a turn away from the identity politics of the feminist and gay rights movements, toward a queer understanding of sexuality that recognizes the stifling potential and constructed nature of identity categories.

It is important to note here that racial and queer critiques must not be regarded as discrete categories -- a large and growing body of queer theory engages with race (and vice versa), and racial critiques of queer texts (and vice versa) are essential to the growth of queer theory. One such text is Marlon B. Ross’ critique of Epistemology of the Closet in “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm.”

Ross critiques Sedgwick for the lack of racial analysis in Epistemology, and for her use of the works of white male subjects such as Proust and Foucault to generalize about modern sexuality overall, thereby implicitly relegating non-white subjects to a pre-modern state. Ross points out that “in most (white) queer theory, race and class make a cameo appearance...only to disappear after they have served to foreground uncloseted desire as

14 Ibid, 24-5.
15 Ibid, 22.
17 Ibid, 171.
definitive of modern sexual identity.”

While coming out and the closet have fallen out of fashion in the world of critical theory, a handful of more recent works engage with this subject matter. In his book *Opacity and the Closet*, Nicholas de Villiers takes up conversations with Sedgwick by theorizing on the works of Foucault, Barthes and Warhol to present a theory of opacity that serves as an alternative to the closet. In an attempt to “[displace]...the dualistic conceptual order of the closet,” de Villiers identifies a “neutral space” that “absorbs the division between speech and silence” (22-3). De Villiers configures alternatives to “a mode of reading that sees ‘silence’ about sexual identity as fully complicit with homophobia and the closet” (64). Both Sedgwick and de Villiers discuss the idea of silence as speech act, and engage Foucault’s notion that “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse” (*Sedgwick Epistemology*, 3). Tony E. Adams takes an autoethnographic, rather than historical, approach in “Paradoxes of Sexuality, Gay Identity and the Closet,” and describes the paradox created by the coming out paradigm in the lived experience of gay people. Adams recounts interactions in which he was unsure whether to declare his gayness, as doing so might create interpersonal discomfort or perhaps danger, while not to do so might be cast as hiding or lying. He proposes that the dominant paradigm of coming out sets gay people up for these relational paradoxical moments, and configures tactics to help circumvent such moments. The rich conversation within scholarship on the subject of coming out and the closet, and what they

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18 Ibid, 176.


20 Ibid, 247.
might mean for queer theory and queer lives, has grown more muted as of late, but it has not died out. The time is ripe to revisit this vital dialogue, which spans decades and yet leaves more to discover.

Defining the Paradigm

If we are to discuss the limitations of the coming out narrative, it is of course necessary to define what that narrative is. The coming out paradigm is both a mode of story-telling, a guideline for how certain stories should be told, and a discourse that includes how these stories may be processed and understood as part of a larger LGBTQ culture. The entry on coming out stories in the *glbtq* online encyclopedia exemplifies this discourse and the way that it reifies coming out as a key component of queer experience. The entry notes that coming out stories have long been a “staple of lesbian and gay culture building,” and lists seven characteristics of these stories, including that “coming out stories involve a crucial naming of the self to the self as someone who loves a member of one's own sex,” “coming out stories empower their tellers,” and “coming out stories defy the implicit and explicit demands of the dominant culture by refusing the injunction to hide or ‘pass’ for heterosexual either to oneself or to those around one.”21 These guidelines explicitly place outness, the declaration of sexual identity, in direct opposition to passing, fear and the closet.

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While the *glbtq* encyclopedia is certainly not the unimpeachable final authority on all things queer, and normative definitions of coming out may vary,²² *glbtq’s* definition of coming out captures both how normative coming out discourse defines the content of coming out stories, insists on the “empowering” nature of these stories, and promotes the centrality of these stories to gay and queer cultures. Although it is oppressive to insist that this single model applies to all gay people, it is important to note that for some gay people, this model does fit. Whether it is because the coming out model describes their experiences or because it helps them to retroactively understand experiences in an positive way, for some gay people this model may indeed “empower.”

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Knowing Jess today it is difficult to imagine a time when she was not outspokenly gay, but although she began to recognize her sexuality in elementary school, she did not tell her family and classmates that she was gay until her senior year of high school. Her first inklings of her queer sexuality came at age seven. Her Catholic grade school paired her up with a fifth-grade girl to be “Lent buddies,” and Jess developed an intense crush on her. Jess recalls thinking, “Oh man, I just wanna kiss her,” but kept these thoughts to herself and nodded along when her friends talked about the boys they liked. She expressed her feelings for her Lent buddy by making her “weird shit,” such as a card decorated with pictures of a girl from a magazine who resembled

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²² Another of these theories is found in A.C. Liang’s “The Creation of Coming-Out Stories.” Liang defines the coming-out story as one that “describes the speaker’s internal experience of recognizing and acknowledging his gayness and the external experience of relaying that to others” (Liang 294). He identifies that the components of the typical story are announcing one’s sexuality to others and accepting the reality one’s own sexuality beforehand. He considers the “coming-out-to-self component” to be in a sense “the most important part of the story” because this is what enables the speaker to share his or her sexuality (298). Liang also describes coming out as processual, as most LGBT people most continually choose to publicly declare their gayness (or choose not to) in many contexts throughout their lives. A.C. Liang, “The Creation of Coherence in Coming-Out Stories,” in *Queerly Phrased*, ed. Anna Livia and Kira Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 287-309.
Jess’ crush. Jess nursed crushes on a number of other girls throughout her childhood, but suppressed her feelings because of the atmosphere of her Catholic school, and because she “thought gay people were gross.” In high school, she began to recognize her feelings as manifestations of a gay sexuality, but struggled to reconcile herself with these feelings and kept her emerging queerness a secret.

Finally, in her senior year of high school, Jess told one friend, and then another and another until everyone at her school knew she was gay. There were a few other openly gay students at her school, but no cohesive gay network or community. Jess spoke positively of her classmates’ reaction to her coming out:

Most of [my classmates] were fine with it. Some of them I’ve heard have talked about me behind my back....I think mostly they’ve been really nice, like I haven’t lost any friends because of it. Um, my parents are cool, the whole town’s pretty cool.

However, she described to me various instances of homophobia that she experienced or witnessed at her school, such as a boy announcing in class, “I just really don’t like gay people...I just think they’re weird,” with no repercussions from the teacher or other students; a girl who was “treated like shit” for dating another girl and subsequently switched schools; and hearing of a gay boy who “got the shit beaten out of him” a few years before.

In response to these events, Jess wrote a blog post about her experiences related to discovering her sexuality in her conservative hometown and witnessing subtle and explicit forms of homophobia. She told me,

A lot of that blog was just about [saying], you guys need to stop doing these things because this is ridiculous you don’t know who’s gay and [who’s] not. Because, I mean, as I found out later, there are a lot of gay kids at my high school. As soon as I came out they all flocked over to me.
Being pursued by people who were previously closeted seemed to be a dominant pattern in Jess’s queer experience. She described a very butch lesbian from her high school who dated “all the closeted lesbians...[and] confused straight girls,” and said that, “the experience that she had in high school is very similar to the one I’ve had here [at Oberlin]...Literally every person that I’ve dated on this campus has been some girl that’s either confused, or never had any experience with a girl before.” She does not know why she winds up dating so many women who are new to their queerness, but suspects it has to do with the fact that she “[comes] off as confident about [her sexuality],” and is “not very feminine presenting, so it’s an easy transition over” for women who are used to dating men. Jess seemed somewhat frustrated with this pattern, as it meant that she was often treated as the masculine or quasi-male party in a relationship, when in fact she identifies solidly as female, and “sometimes [she has] to do girly things.” She is sometimes unsure if it is acceptable to her partners when she does typically “girly” things, and this frustrates her because she is, as she emphatically told me, “not a dude.”

Though I do not seek to erase the many elements of Jess’ story that are specific to her own experience, a number of aspects of her narrative conform with those of a coming-out discourse. Jess’s narrative contains a series of four general (and overlapping) stages that are common with the dominant narrative that are usually referred to by the term “coming out”: first, a period of grappling with her sexual identity in the face of a heteronormative, oppressive world that would deny her gayness, which caused her internal distress, confusion, and perhaps self-loathing; second, a period of realization and secrecy during which she struggled to accept and own her gay sexual identity while keeping this new knowledge hidden from the rest of the world; third, a period of declaration, during which she engaged in truth-revealing by telling her family.
and those around her that she was gay and was subsequently subject to their (in her case, mostly positive) reactions, and fourth, a period of affinity during which she was able to distinguish her queer self from the straight masses and engage in a shared identity with other queer people. This period of affinity may continue to include fear, but it marks the end of secrecy. This sequence implies that the queer self is essential and innate: it is at first hidden because of the oppressive outside world, it is internally discovered, and once it is unearthed and accepted by the gay subject, it must be shared with the world in an act of pride. Coming out is the act of revealing an essential truth (one’s gay identity), by which this truth may be universally understood. While a queer approach resists the notion of essential identities, some gay people may keenly feel that the discovery of essential truth implied by coming out discourse does indeed match their reality.

Jess’s story embodies the coming out narrative quite poignantly because Jess has assumed the position of a beacon of queerness -- someone with whom girls questioning their sexualities experiment and closeted gay folks find a welcoming ear. Jess has taken up this role somewhat ambivalently, as she is sometimes uncomfortable with the ways in which other queer women have pushed her into roles, such as the surrogate male, that she is not comfortable occupying. At the same time, through acts such as her blog post, she has pursued a role of heightened visibility, both because it is both edifying for herself and it presents an opportunity to help others who have shared her struggles. Jess’s contentious relationship with the gay visibility that she has fought to attain within her communities gestures toward the joyful and painful aspects of a queer alignment that is centered on visibility. Even for Jess, coming out is not simply truth-telling; it is an act that subjects one’s identity to the judgment and interpretation of others. Though Jess has harnessed her gay visibility to gain a sense of personal empowerment and joy in empowering
others, the visibility that her continued coming-out efforts have afforded her has had a range of positive and negative effects that span far beyond the moment of empowerment associated with declaring one’s sexual identity.

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Even for queer people whose stories do not strictly resemble the typical coming out structure, closet discourse may inform the way they conceptualize their own narrative. One of these women, a college freshman named Katy, told me that she had begun to see herself as bisexual the summer before her senior year of high school. She described her hometown as a fairly progressive place that “doesn’t really make queerness into a big deal,” so she was accepting of her own thoughts of perhaps dating a girl. However, a relationship with a boy during her senior year of high school set her back from “processing” her queerness during that time. She first discussed her bisexuality with another friend who was also beginning to identify as bisexual, and then disclosed her identity to some other friends. At the time of our interview, she had told her parents about being bisexual only a few weeks before, during a school break. She described the discussion with her father as “awkward,” and laughed as she described her mother’s response: “Well, this is a very good time for you to be questioning these things and exploring!” Katy felt it was time to tell her parents about her sexual orientation because she was “becoming attracted to actual people” in college, in addition to her prior abstract sense of her bisexuality. “There’s no one who I’ve told so far who I was scared they wouldn’t be okay with it,” Katy told me, “and so I feel incredibly privileged in that way.”

Although Katy’s experience telling her family and close friends at home about her bisexuality went smoothly, she told me that her next step in coming out was to tell her extended
family, who are more conservative and less accepting of gay people. She told me that she was planning to tell them that she was bisexual the next time she saw them because she is close with a younger cousin with whom she often discusses boys and crushes. Katy didn’t want to hide her bisexuality from her cousin by only discussing boys she likes and omitting female crushes because she “doesn’t wanna feel like [she has] to do that.” Katy expressed nervousness about telling these relatives she was bisexual. She thought they would still accept her, but she was afraid they would think of or treat her differently once they knew. However, she also said that she thought it would be good to endure a more difficult disclosure experience, as it would allow her to be “more empathetic about other people’s experiences.”

“I almost feel like I don’t really have a coming out story,” Katy told me at the end of our interview. To her, the term coming out “[implies] that it’s like this like major thing that like you have to tell people and you’re not sure if they’re gonna be okay with it,” and that had not been her experience. Katy sensed that the lack of adversity in her experiences telling those in her life about being bisexual precluded her from having a true coming out experience. Her unease reveals how intensely the dominant narrative of adversarial coming out structures many gay young people’s notions of a “true” queer experience. Katy was still deciding how to inhabit her bisexuality, and part of that decision was situated in her relationship to the dominant narrative arc of the coming out story, one that she understood to necessarily include an adversarial element. While I do not seek to downplay the very real hostility that many gay young people face in expressing their sexualities, it seems oddly antiquated that the notion of a hostile response to one’s non-normative sexuality is so deeply ingrained that Katy felt she needed a survival badge to fully claim her queerness. Yet one perhaps should not be shocked, as the anticipation of
rejection and animosity is deeply ingrained in the collective psyche of gay communities. In a changing world where LGBT people are slowly and unevenly but surely gaining mainstream acceptance in many communities, a queer initiation that includes the experience of rejection may no longer fit. Yes, it is fair to wager that most, if not all, gay people in America experience some sort of hostility related to their sexual identities at some point in their lives. It is not unlikely that Katy will be subject to some sort of (hopefully mild and brief) animosity related to her queerness at some point. But in today’s world, the fact that she has not experienced such animosity yet, at such a young age and such an early stage in her life as a queer person, should be no impediment to her claim to queerness. While Katy may have been correct that she has not experienced “coming out” in the traditional sense, she had yet to realize that queerness without this form of coming out is possible and legitimate. It is crucial that more narrative structures than just coming out become integrated into the collective understanding of gay lives, so that all queer people may recognize the legitimacy of their own stories and experiences.

As we expand the range of narratives, it is important to be mindful of who is at risk of being left out, particularly because of the language we use to discuss queerness. Because all of my participants were Oberlin students, they all shared a certain cultural capital that one obtains by attending a prestigious college. It is necessary to consider how the vocabularies that are taught, validated and rewarded at Oberlin may not just describe, but in fact construct, the ways that Oberlin students experience queerness. Many of my participants described marked changes to their understanding of their queerness occurring once they reached Oberlin, and while most people go through many changes as they are reaching adulthood, some changes my participants described seem specifically tied to the knowledges and communities available in an environment
like Oberlin. For example, a participant named Eve was first introduced the concept of queerness through hearing about a class her friend was taking that focused on queer theory. She then began to do her own research, and ultimately began to identify as queer. Educational privilege is also evidenced in the language my participants used to discuss their experiences, comfortably discussing heteronormativity and the gender binary. While many people of all backgrounds certainly experience, think about, and discuss these forces, the act of naming them in particular, academically-influenced ways reflects a privileged access to certain discourses. Although the availability of information and access to communities provided by the internet has surely made these knowledges more democratic, the ease of accessibility to queer discourse at Oberlin is certainly not representative of the world at large. It is important to consider that the ways that Oberlin queer women describe their sexual identities may be shaped by languages that reflect a certain type of educational privilege and social capital, and in using these terminologies, we may bar people who are not surrounded by the same resources from entering the dialogue.

Queerly in Time

Strangely enough, when viewed in a certain light, coming out operates in straight time. In a chrononormative gesture, the imperative to come out demands that the queer subject sort herself -- make her difference known so that she may be placed non-disruptively in her proper category within society. The paradigm of coming out assumes a forward march; a linear progression from the closet (shame, fear, secrecy) to outness (pride, maturity, honesty).24

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Furthermore, this paradigm posits that the end goal of the process of gay actualization is outness. Outness is the ultimate sign of gay maturity and adulthood, and gay folks who are not fully out are marked as being in denial, liars, or not fully developed. A binary is thereby created between *in* and *out* of the closet, and this binary is temporally situated, tied to the assumption that those who are still closeted will strive toward or at least long for outness.

“There are ways of growing that are not growing up,” writes Kathryn Bond Stockton in *The queer Child*. If coming out is viewed as a rite of passage in the process of “growing up” into gay adulthood, then what might it look like to grow in another direction? Stockton introduces the concept of “growing sideways,” which she uses to describe the growth of gay children during periods of delay that constitute childhood: “their propensity for growing astray inside the delay that defines who they ‘are.’”25 While we often regard the main goal of childhood to be eventual development into adulthood, we simultaneously enforce delay as we protect the supposed innocence of children.26 Ultimately, Stockton says, “‘growing sideways’ suggests that the width of a person’s experiences or ideas, their motives or their motivations, may pertain at any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of sorts.”27 While Stockton uses sideways growth to conceptualize gay childhood, this theory is also useful to describe gay adults’ growth into queer alignment. The coming out paradigm describes a form of “growing up,” regarding the closet as a space of delay to be outgrown, and coming out as the inevitable and incontrovertible goal of the closeted subject. A queer approach to the development of a gay subject might instead illuminate and value periods of sideways growth. Stockton’s queer child is one who is shaped by

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26 Ibid, 5.
27 Ibid, 11.
opportunities to “grow astray” during these delays, which are meant to be no more than holding periods during the supposed “slow unfolding” of childhood.”

A queer adult may also grow astray during the delays of their normatively-defined growth. These sideways-growth periods are opportunities for queer alignment - forms of self-naming and understanding that are not goal-oriented, but exploratory. While coming out discourse focuses on and lauds a particular type of growth, with the ultimate goal of outness always looming, queer sideways growth allows gay subjects to appreciate the fullness of their experience, particularly during threshold periods of partial visibility and uncertainty.

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Women situated in the uncertain early stages of defining and understanding their queerness and how they were to inhabit it made for particularly interesting interview subjects. A certain type of knowledge can only be conveyed from the thick of an experience, before the experience has been analyzed and contextualized; before the edge has worn off. There were decisions yet to be made for these women about who to tell and how, about how to phrase it and when to say it, about how to frame and understand the experience of being queer.

Lily Umino, who was twenty and a college junior at the time I interviewed her, was new to her queerness, and was in a relationship with a man. “I’ve never told my parents [that I’m queer],” Lily said, “which I guess is why it doesn’t feel as, like permanent, or maybe as significant, because I feel like there’s a whole culture around coming out to your parents, specifically.” She had, however, told friends and her sister that she was queer. She was surprised

28 Ibid, 4.

29 Lily Umino requested that a first and last name be included in her pseudonym in order to reflect her biracial (Japanese and white/Jewish) identity.
that when she told her sister, who was in a serious relationship with a man, her sister said, “Me too!” Lily was still in the midst of figuring out what being queer meant in her life, a struggle that was exacerbated by her current straight-conforming relationship. However, she described her queerness as an alignment that went beyond partner choice -she described queerness as “a more progressive and maybe fluid way of looking at sexuality,” and aimed to “maybe combat this gender binary, through my identifying myself as queer, if that makes sense.” Although she richly conceptualizes what queerness meant to her, she described feeling “very distant” from “Queer theory and like queer cultures and queer lifestyles.” She said this bothered her “a little bit,” and she attributed the main cause of this distance to her “heterosexual relationship,” which she recognized might mask her queerness to others. She felt that queer communities might not accept her if she was dating a man, “and I wouldn’t blame them, you know, it kind of seems like I’m a fake or something.”

Because she felt distant from queer communities and her monogamous heterosexual relationship ruled out the type of same-gender sexual exploration that is widely associated with developing queer sexuality, Lily had to seek alternative means to explore what her queerness meant to her. She told me that the moment that she thought of as her “coming out story” was when she participated in a portraiture project about the breadth and diversity of Asian-American queer women and gender-non-conforming people. She found out that the project was happening in a nearby city, where the woman running the project was shooting portraits to post online. Lily thought it would be “empowering” to be able to “look at [the site] and then be like, that’s me, and I can see myself in this community, and...that could be a space for me.” The photographer interviewed Lily before the shoot and asked her what her coming out story was. When Lily
admitted she hadn’t told many people that she was queer, the photographer exclaimed, “Oh, this is your coming out party!” By participating in the project, Lily was able to carve out a queer self-understanding through her ties to her Asian-American identity. The mode of visibility that felt most authentic to Lily was one that placed her within an intersectional scheme where she could assert her multiple and interconnected identities and alignments at once. This specific mode of visibility was especially important to Lily because she felt that her heterosexual relationship masked her queerness and perhaps in some ways diminished the validity of her claim to a queer sexuality. Therefore, it was empowering for her to stake her visibility within a community to which she had multiple claims.

Although the photographer celebrated Lily’s photo-shoot as her “coming out party,” Lily’s story in fact bears little resemblance to the standard timeline of the coming out paradigm. Lily said that her process had been about “coming out to myself, more than anything.” Although she described being clued into her queerness by crushes on other women, her sense of her queerness had more to do with “a more progressive and maybe fluid way of looking at sexuality.” This viewpoint included being critical of racial dynamics within her own relationships and “combatting the gender binary,” and therefore her queerness was not determined by who she was dating. She began self-describing as queer when she stumbled upon the portrait project’s website and it “resonated with [her],” but was still deciding how to navigate her visibility as queer in various situation. Lily described herself as a “baby queer,” situated in the early stages of her queer alignment. By experimenting with visibility on the internet, participation in different communities, and exploring the intersections between her racial, gendered and sexual identities, Lily was growing sideways within her queer development. Rather than making outness her goal,
Lily focused on choosing her forms of visibility meaningfully and authentically. While the coming out paradigm primarily values the objective of outness and casts all intermediate stages as steps toward that goal, a queer approach that emphasizes growing sideways recognizes that visibility may look different for different queer people, and that periods of delay, particularly during early phases of queer alignment, may be more important than the end goal of the process.

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While Lily developed an intersectional approach that integrated her racial identity to develop her queer alignment, Eve, also a sophomore, tied her queer identity to a non-normative vision of adulthood. Eve said that she had considered that she might be gay in middle school and at various points during high school, but she “was only interested in dating boys,” because “there were no queer people at [her] high school,” and “that kind of environment makes it a difficult thing.” At Oberlin, in a more queer-friendly environment, being gay progressively became “normalized” to her. She said that for her, “[coming out] was mostly internal...Mostly coming out to myself was the important thing that happened, and that’s been recent.”

Eve had not explicitly told her family about her sexuality, and said she was “a little bit afraid” to do so. She was worried they wouldn’t understand “how I can be attracted to men and women. I think my dad’s more accepting of being gay, but I don’t think he understands, like, queer sexuality, and my mom would just not like any of it.” I asked Eve when she would feel it was time to declare her queerness to her family, and after a pause, she said,

Well, if I was seriously dating a girl...although, I don’t know, I don’t like to tell them when I’m dating anybody, so, um, I guess in the future, when ‘it’s-time-to-get married’ pressure gets more intense, it’s like are you gonna have kids, that kinda thing, that’s probably gonna be a conversation I’m gonna have to have. ‘Cause...part of being queer to me is not, envisioning that...marriage, nuclear family, kinda thing. And I think that’s probably gonna be disappointing to them. Yeah, so I don’t know, I’m not really sure how to address that.
Eve’s queer alignment was not just related to partner choice, but also to her desire to live a life that would resist the structure of a chrononormative timeline. This understanding of queerness complicated what it meant for Eve to explain her queer alignment to her family, as she would need to make a declaration not just about partner choices, but about broader life decisions as well. Eve clearly demonstrated here that “outness” was not the ultimate goal of her process of self-discovery -- if it was, she would surely not plan on waiting until the last possible moment to come out. Eve felt that her ability to explore what queerness would mean for her and how it would structure her life would be hindered by having to explain it to her family, and chose instead to grow sideways into a holistic queerness that interacted with many aspects of her self-definition, and only share this information with her family as needed. By resisting coming out, Eve willfully created her own period of delay in which to grow sideways.

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By using a sideways-growth model to understand resistance to the normative coming out paradigm, we may illuminate ways in which periods of delay and non-normative modes of personal growth are central to queer alignment. While Eve and Lily did not explicitly position themselves in resistance to the coming out model, the ways that they conceptualized and told their stories bore little resemblance to the type of coming out narrative described, for example, in the *glbtq* dictionary. An essential difference between Lily and Eve, and a gay subject described by the coming out paradigm, is that the two women I interviewed did not view themselves as closeted, nor as pre-coming-out. To clarify, the archetypal gay subject described by the coming out narrative must come out in order to become fully actualized -- her maturity is contingent on her outness. For Lily and Eve, navigating many small interactions related to queer alignment was
what defined their experience, not a particular end goal. In this view, in fact, there is no end goal, nor a timeline. There is simply the act of being, queerly, in the world, and growing (sideways, diagonally, and in all directions) into a self that feels inhabitable and authentic.

The Joys and Pains of Queer Visibility

What is the difference between outness and visibility? The two are inextricable, and yet many of my participants indicated that their level of outness and their level of queer visibility were two different measures. If outness comes in fits and starts, staccato moments of declaration and verbal interaction, visibility runs quieter but deeper, a legato passage that conceals layers of meaning and resonance. Coming out operates in one register, the verbal, while visibility is culled from clothing, manner of movement in space, facial expression, stickers on bicycles and guitars, events one attends, songs for which one rushes to the dance floor, and countless other components that make up one’s way of being, queerly, in the world. Finally, coming out is positioned as both an act and a goal, while I argue that queer visibility is not a tangible goal or specific act, but a value-neutral tactic that may be useful to a person navigating and determining her queer alignment.

Although gender and sexual identity are distinct from one another, in this instance they are closely tied. As gender nonconforming people are aware, one’s gender expression may often lead others to draw (correct or incorrect) conclusions about one’s sexual identity. For my participants who presented in a non-gender-conforming way, reactions to their clothing and gender presentation influenced their experience of their queerness. Meanwhile, for my participants who were more femme or gender-conforming, femme expression lead them to feel
that their queerness was at times obscured from others, and this invisibility sometimes caused frustration about not being read by others as queer.

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“A lot of people ask me what my deal is,” said Em, a masculine-of-center queer person with a dapper sense of style and long hair. Em told me about the first time they told their mother they were queer, and the first time they told a friend at Oberlin. The two stories were similarly structured: both Em’s mother and the friend openly asked Em if they were gay. Em recounted coming to Oberlin with the intention of being silent about their sexuality:

In the conservatory I didn’t wanna be that like gay girl, I didn’t wanna be the queer person, I just wanted to like put my head down and my ass up and do work. Like, just read and study and become the best student and [musician] I could be. I didn’t wanna have anything else to distract me, including my sexuality.

However, during the “second or third week of school,” Em was practicing their instrument with a Jessica, a friend in the conservatory, and the Jessica asked, “So, are you gay or not?” Em affirmed that they were gay, and “the next day three or four people came up to [them] and were like, ‘Do you wanna go on dates?’”

Em’s story of telling their mother about their sexuality paralleled this earlier story. At the end of Em’s first year, their mother was visiting at Oberlin and asked Em over brunch, “Are you gay?” Em acted out the interaction for me, recounting her mother’s words in a southern accent:

She was like, ‘I have a question,’ and I was like, ‘What’s up,’ and she was like, ‘Are you gay?’ I said, ‘Yes ma’am,’ or [southern accent] ‘Yes ma’am, I’m gay,’ and she was like, ‘Oh, okay.’ And I said, ‘Well no, actually I’m queer,’ and she was like, ‘Is that like bisexual?’ And I was like, ‘No,’ so we talked about queerness for awhile, and then, it was like really funny, so we talked about queerness for a minute or two, and then she was like, ‘So, how does that work?’ I was like, ‘sexually?’ And she was like, ‘Yeah,’ and I was like, ‘I give you five minutes to think about it for yourself, and then you can come back to me with any questions. Any technical questions, you can come back to me.’ And my mom told me that she did not need five minutes and that she got the point. Anyway, so that’s my coming-out story.
Em recounted these stories in a joking, light-hearted tone. It was clear that they were at peace with the events they were discussing, and they had confronted these discussions with sense of humor. However, it is striking how in both the incidents with Jessica and with Em’s mother, the coming-out discussion occurred as an intervention initiated by a straight person. In Jessica’s case, this intervention was particularly significant, as it threw a wrench in Em’s plan of passing as straight so as to focus on their studies. Em’s admission of their queerness caused Jessica to share the news with others who had inquired about Em’s sexuality, which then opened up Em’s dating prospects.

I broke out in laughter when Em told me about their initial plan to stay closeted in college, because Em had become an distinctly visible and vocal queer figure on campus. It was bizarre to imagine them any other way. However, it was only an intervention from a straight friend that caused them to become publicly gay at Oberlin at all. What elusive quality did Jessica and Em’s other friends pick up from a femme-presenting Em that signaled queerness? Would Em have ever come out at Oberlin if not for this intervention? How long would it have taken? Em did not seem preoccupied with these questions, but instead viewed these interruptions to their plan with amusement.

Em’s story reflects one of the ways that the coming-out paradigm does not adequately describe a life lived queerly. As Tony E. Adams describes, the coming out paradigm presupposes that “gay identity is a contentious, stigmatized identity.”\(^{30}\) Coming out is a dangerous action, as “the closet draws meaning only in relation to heteronormative contexts” in which a gay person

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might be rejected or marginalized for not only their gayness, but also for ostensibly hiding their gayness up until the time of coming out.\textsuperscript{31} Coming out, within this framework, is risky, but also valorous - to stay closeted is cast as “an act of silence indicative of shame and self-hatred,” while coming out registers as “healthy,...mature,...and politically responsible.”\textsuperscript{32} If we accept that this framework adequately describes coming out discourse, as I believe it does, then to be outed (to have one’s sexual identity uncovered, unbidden, by someone else) is embarrassing and shameful in this context -- it robs the gay subject of the chance to reflect their health, maturity, and sense of political responsibility! In fact, this paradigm implies, to be outed signals a lack of these traits.

However, Em did not seem to regard these stories with shame or even discomfort. A possible framework for understanding Em’s experiences can be found in Eve Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” As Sedgwick describes, a paranoid position that constantly searches for conspiracy and expects evil around every corner has become so common within critical theory that it seems at times to be the only possible method of reading, or at least the only one that is properly critical.\textsuperscript{33} However, the paranoid strategy need be only one tactic in a larger arsenal. Sedgwick describes another position, the reparative position, that the theorist may take. “The desire of a reparative impulse...is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; its wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.”\textsuperscript{34} A reparative approach does not deny that our world is rife with evil and conspiracy, but simply

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 236.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 238.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 149
affirms the validity of other readings that place value on critical optimism -- understanding critically how the *good* in our experiences came to be. By viewing their encounters with their mother and their friend through a reparative lens, Em was able to understand these encounters as not invasive, but useful. Em’s mother and friend had been able to see something in Em that Em was not able yet to voice, and by inquiring about Em’s gayness, they made it okay for Em to answer in the affirmative. Em seemed unconcerned with the emotions or difficulties of the moments they described, and instead focused on the positive changes that these moments wrought, such as a more open relationship with their mother and a position of queer visibility that they had come to value on campus. Em’s choice to read these moments reparatively reflected a determination to claim their story in a way that created room for positive growth within their relationships with their mother and friend, and within their own self-understanding.

It is important to note here that many forms of outing may be deeply invasive and at times dangerous. In the instances I have discussed, it was the trust and affection established between Em and the other party that allowed Em to read the situation reparatively. Em described other occasions of being harassed by strangers and questioned about their gender presentation and sexual identity, and they understandably viewed these experiences through a more paranoid lens. A tension seemed to be at play for Em between their desire to express a political message through their presentation and their desire to maintain privacy. They described tactics they had devised to deal with these situations. Em said that they were fine with anyone knowing that they were gay, but “when people [asked] more personal questions,” such as “are you a top or a bottom,” or questioned them aggressively about the gendered nature of their clothes, Em declined to answer or turned the conversation around on the inquirer. Ultimately, Em said,
“anyone who should know the answer [to questions about my gender and sexuality] does.” A more flexible paradigm of visibility is required in order to describe the nuanced ways that queer subjects may choose to dis/engage with others in discussions of their queerness. In Em’s case, control of their own visibility in various instances is key, and Em must devise their own tactics to maintain this control, but within relationships of trust, their boundaries shift and create room for an open dialogue.

**Dressing Out**

It was no coincidence that clothing was of the most common reoccurring topics throughout my interview process. If queer alignment is made visible in many different ways, as I have claimed, clothing is one of the most concrete of these manifestations, and one of the easiest to observe and describe. While gay women certainly use many tactics, on conscious and subconscious levels, to reveal or conceal their identities in daily life, clothing seemed to be one of the the tactics that my participants were most comfortable talking about, perhaps because dressing oneself involves daily decision-making that happens on a conscious level. Furthermore, many queer women are highly attuned to the ways that others, queer and straight, react to their clothing choices, and use these reactions to help them process how they are received by the world. In an article accompanying their short documentary film about style and gender expression in the lives of queer women, “Gender, Bespoke,” AD Hogan and Becca Kahn-Block write, “for queer women, clothing is about much more than what you’re wearing. Clothing allows us to create an identity for ourselves—and to control how other people view us and consider us.”

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refers to clothing and other sensual emissions (such as ways of talk and touch) as the “front stage” of an encounter, and describes how manipulation of the front stage may allow queer people to make their queerness known, or create space for others to inquire about their identity, without engaging in the often-awkward act of announcing one’s gayness. “What I am calling for,” he writes, “is an intentional-but-unobtrusive manipulation of premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet in everyday interaction, a call that uses physical bodies to create dissonance and, consequently, social change.”

Clothing choices are for many queer women a way to elaborate on their queer alignment, and express elements of gendered and cultural identities in a nuanced and non-verbal way that is free to fluctuate over time.

Though queer women across the range of gender expression engage in queer visibility moves through clothing choices, the considerations faced by women who are femme or feminine-of-center and those faced by women who are androgynous, masculine-of-center or butch vary greatly. For many women who tend toward feminine styles, being read as straight may be a primary frustration. One woman, who appears in “Gender, Bespoke,” says that she is “strongly connected to [her] femininity and to a femme presentation.” In the video, she describes markers she uses to display her queer identity in her physical appearance. She says, “It’s like little small things that allow me to assert that, like having a shaved portion of my head, or a septum ring, or a tattoo, just like having tiny markers for myself that I can touch.” She cites the dual stereotypes of the “lipstick lesbian” and “the butch lesbian,” and responds to them by saying “Fuck you, I’m neither of those, and I don’t wanna be.” However, her attempts to render her queerness visible are not entirely sufficient, and she says that “[her] queerness [is] kind of

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invisible in [her] femininity.” Ultimately, she says, “It doesn’t feel good to constantly be read as a straight cis-woman. It’s a certain erasure of who I am.” For this woman, and many other femme queer women, it is difficult to find ways to manipulate the front stage that both render visible a queer alignment while retaining the femme presentation that feels authentic to her.

While some queer feminine-presenting women struggle to be read as queer, others may experience the choice not to showcase queerness in their dress as a type of freedom. Becca, a woman I interviewed who identified as “bisexual homo-romantic,” described being told by her roommate, “You look really straight,” and being gently teased by friends for “not being out enough.” She told me that she didn’t do anything in particular to make herself appear more queer, and she felt good about the fact that she did not have to dress a certain way to somehow prove her bisexuality. Becca was grateful that she was able to access a queer community without having to look or present in any certain way. She noted that the fact that people she met were not able to identify her as queer until she told them was sometimes bothersome to her. Lily echoed Becca’s sentiments, saying that because of her femme style, “people wouldn’t necessarily pinpoint [her] as queer. But I mean that’s also kind of the point of queerness, that...there is no look, or anything, it’s just people.” These women alluded to an existing pressure within queer life to be, in Becca’s words, “out enough,” which might involve dressing in stereotypically gay or lesbian way. For both Becca and Sarah, claiming the right to a femme presentation was important to their experience of queerness, and their resistance to the imperative to change their style marked the open, accepting type of queer community in which they wished to participate. Although a lack of queer visibility or recognizability is a common frustration to many feminine-presenting queer women, the ability to choose whether or not to mark oneself as queer with one’s
clothing is a freedom that many butch, androgynous, and masculine-of-center women do not share.

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For queer women who dress outside the realm of normative femininity, clothing choices can be an empowering source of visibility, as well as a frustrating opportunity for others to police their sexuality and gender identities and expressions. Em described being frequently asked about their gender and sexual orientation by strangers. “Yeah, people like ask me all the time if I’m, like gay, or what my deal is. A lot of people ask me what my deal is.” These questions seem to be derived largely from Em’s intentionally “dykey” gender presentation, which Em describes as a “drag,” or “performance making fun of white masculinity...I’m joking around all the time with what I wear.” However, unlike many masculine-presenting dykes, Em wears their hair long. This presentation leads to a lot of commentary from strangers in public spaces. When asked what their deal is, Em responds, “I’m just throwing the white hegemonic state system. Like, what’s your deal?...Fuck you.” Em took these unwanted confrontations and intrusions from strangers that were clearly aimed at Em’s gender or sexuality as an opportunity to share not Em’s sexual or gender orientation, but their political orientation. In this way, Em is able to seize control of these instances of unwanted interruptive questioning, and assert their own subjectivity.

Em’s style takes many cues from traditionally preppy, wealthy, masculine and white dress. They said of their everyday attire,

I typically wear like some kind of, I wear a button-down every single day of my life, I wear some type of pants, sometimes jeans but mostly pants, and the shoes are either redwing boots which are very preppy and very expensive, [sigh] thank you Dad...or, like wingtips, or penny loafers or oxfords or something, and then a tie and a vest and a blazer with a pocket square. I mean, it’s, the look is very, um, very classically American, I would say.
Em aimed to subvert dominant masculinity through the dissonance created by the history of these styles and Em’s outspokenly radical queer politics.

I think like the subversion comes...with what does it look like for this to be on like a queer female body that’s poking fun of it all the time... But also, like, I think the subversion comes in as well in like the way I acquire clothes, too, like thrift-store shopping.

However, to someone not attuned to the cues of Em’s politics and queerness, the subversion intended through these styles might be mistaken for a straight-faced imitation of hegemonic masculinity, particularly on Em’s white body. The subversion of acquiring clothing “through non-traditional, non-capitalist means” could be particularly lost, as a well-maintained expensive oxford shirt bought from a thrift store may look no different than the same shirt bought new and worn a few times. The question that arises, then, is whether or not these subversive moves can be understood as successful if they appear to much of the world as simply another manifestation of the dominance of white, wealthy masculinity. Here is where a queer alignment reading diverges from an outness based reading. Outness can only exist as it is understood by others -- often straight others. Queer alignment, meanwhile, centers itself on the queer self and queer communities. Therefore, Em’s visibility moves may be only correctly interpreted by people in queer or radical communities, and this reality may not be a failure at all. If we can accept that our visibility moves need not be universally understood, then we may re-center queer visibility on queer communities, and move away from a queer politics that is contingent upon recognition from straight folks.

While non-normative gender presentation can afford opportunities for queer interventions in daily life, the experience of sticking out is something that each individual must grapple with. Reaching the point of comfort with the queer visibility afforded by non-normative gender
presentation can be a fraught journey for some queer women. For Jess, denial of her gay sexuality at a young age and being surrounded by a conservative community in her hometown led her to resist masculine presentation during her teenage years. She said,

When I was in high school, I told myself I’m never gonna look like that girl. I’m never gonna look like that butch lesbian. That’s never gonna be me, I’m never gonna wear guy’s clothes, I’m never gonna cut my hair really short, I’m just, I’m never gonna not wear make up, just these things are not gonna happen...I just didn’t want to be that stereotype, and...I also thought that was really unattractive, cause that’s what I was told was unattractive.

However, since she arrived at college, her style has become progressively more androgynous. It happened incrementally and naturally -- she says her hair “just gradually got shorter,” and at some point she “began buying boys’ clothes” -- but her struggle to be comfortable in her gender presentation is not over. Jess admitted to being “very focused on what other people think of [her],” and therefore is “very comfortable here [at Oberlin], but as soon as you put [her] in any other setting [she shrinks].” At Oberlin, she says, “I can just walk around and just look dapper as fuck, and just be like, I’m in a tie, I’m wearing boys clothing, and I go somewhere else and people are just looking at you weird.” Jess experienced the evolution of her androgynous presentation as a natural growth that was somewhat beyond her control, and not as a political or contrived statement.

Em and Jess were both forced to grapple with the visibility afforded them by non-normative gender presentation, but their attitudes toward it remained different. While Em was signifying a political orientation with their clothing, and integrating the responses they received into the meanings of these signifiers, Jess chose non-gender-normative clothes because such styles simply felt right, and shied away from the attention she received for her presentation. Similar cues that Jess and Em presented in their clothing and style were symbolic for each of
them of very different meanings, and the diversity of both signs and meanings in these visibility cues represents the richness of a queer approach visibility. Em and Jess have each developed, somewhat unwittingly, their own languages of queerness that operate on multiple registers at once, with certain information totally public (such as clothing choices) and other information shared only with select groups (such as queer nods in their style that only other queer folks would pick up on, or personal feelings about style that would be conveyed through discussion). A queer alignment approach to visibility allows the measure of success to shift from how straight people interpret visibility gestures toward a focus on the queer subject’s experience of displaying their visibility and the ways that these gestures foster community. Through these layers of message and meaning, a discourse of queer visibility arises that is far more nuanced than a single coming-out conversation could ever be.

**Beyond Disclosure: Lee’s Predicament**

Of all the stories I gathered during the research of this paper, none captured the various interventions I have described in this paper quite so eloquently as Lee’s. Lee described growing up in a town where there were “actually zero” gay people of whom she was aware. She said that “the environment I grew up in was just so heteronormative, I just didn’t think about my sexuality.” During her first year at Oberlin, she “blocked off” thoughts about her queer sexuality because she “knew it was gonna be really hard to figure out... [and] I was just kinda shocked.” It was during this period that she began “hooking up with a girl,” who she then began dating seriously. Lee says that she did not necessarily understand this experience to mean anything larger about her own sexuality at the time; rather, she still considered herself straight and was “just in a relationship...and it was with a girl.” After the relationship ended, she finally began to
seriously consider her own sexuality and inclinations. Being single allowed her to ask herself, “Ok, what is going on with me?” This process of discovery was aided by *The L Word*, of which Lee watched “seven seasons, or six, in a three week span.” Lee’s timeline for discovering her queerness evidences a type of sideways growth, as the impetus for Lee to develop her queer alignment was not a same-sex partner, but solo explorations of gay media and self-examination. Lee had already told her sisters about her relationship, and when she and her ex-girlfriend got back together, she decided to share the news with her parents. Because she “didn’t want to have the conversation” and felt awkward discussing her sexuality and love life with her parents, she decided to tell them about it over email. She describes the tone of the announcement as, “I’m dating someone, they happen to be a girl, I’m not like saying that I’m gay, I’m just saying that I’m dating this person and, like, they happen to be a girl.” Her parents reacted positively, saying, “whatever makes you happy, love is love.”

At the end of our interview, I asked Lee if she wanted to share anything else that we had not yet touched on. She said, “Well, [there is] something I noticed when my parents came for Parents’ Weekend...” Although her parents responded to her announcement with acceptance, Lee and her mother have experienced friction related to Lee’s evolving gender expression, as evidenced by her clothing choices. Lee cites that “it really happened when I cut my hair, cause I never dressed really girly but I think she could hold on to the standard of beauty that’s like, oh, long blonde hair, that’s okay.” She had noticed this discomfort when her parents had recently visited, and her mother asked her, “Do you ever consider dressing in a more attractive way?” Lee responded, “This is the way that I wanna dress. I [asked] her, ‘What would you want me to wear?’ And she’s like, ‘Something tighter,’ and I’m like, ‘No!’” For Lee’s mother, non-normative
gender presentation represented a boundary of acceptability. In this situation, the announcement of a gay relationship or sexuality was not problematic, but aspects of Lee’s queer alignment that were announced nonverbally were points of friction. For Lee, being queer “is definitely...more that my sexuality...[it is] also the way I present myself, [it’s] just like who I am...it’s just a whole term.” Because her queerness extends beyond simply sexual inclinations or conduct, the fullness of her queer alignment was not legible in her coming out statement.

Lee’s story exemplifies why the verbal coming-out paradigm does not suffice for a queer subject --what is said, what is meant, and what is heard in a moment of queer coming out may all be very different. In Lee’s case, she simply told her mother that she was dating a girl. For her, dating a girl and wearing loose-fitting clothes were part of the same queer alignment that encompasses “who [she] is.” However, in her mother’s mind, these various aspects of Lee’s self were separate and unrelated. Therefore, she was able to accept Lee’s desire to date women and criticize Lee’s manner of dress. Lee, however, experienced her mother’s criticism of her clothing as a failure to accept Lee’s queer self completely. This conflict in understanding reveals the gap between a hegemonic understanding of identity, which isolates and compartmentalizes various aspects of the self, and a queer alignment, which builds from the intersections and overlaps of these aspects and emphasizes the necessity of exploration and change throughout time. This conflict means that the ways differently situated people think of moments of coming out may not indeed be workable when the parties involved have different ways of approaching identity. If what is said cannot be understood across the divide, or if the message that the queer subject seeks to convey is not expressible with words, then a statement of coming out will not be the empowering and illuminating moment that the dominant paradigm of coming out would have us
believe. The problem is that the normative coming out paradigm creates the expectation that one’s identities can and should be declared verbally. This interaction, according to Adams’ premises of coming out, is “conceived of as a concrete, linear process with a definitive end,” and this process must be negotiated explicitly through disclosure (such as saying “I am gay”) or action (such as sharing a same-sex kiss in public).\textsuperscript{38} This understanding leaves little room for subtleties of identity and alignment that go beyond or elaborate on one’s sexual partners of choice, but that may be equally integral to a queerly aligned self.

Queerness is not situated simply in the realm of sexuality, nor simply the realm of the verbal. Queerness weaves through the ways we move, the clothes we wear, the people we date, the politics we espouse, our race and class identities, and recognizes that all these are deeply connected. Although interwoven identities exist for people of all sexual orientations, queerness is more explicit about this reality; it strives never to dissociate from the other axes of identification that make up our beings. All these elements of our selves cannot be expressed in a single statement, nor in a single conversation, nor, at times, in words at all. The ways in which we button our shirts, sit in our chairs, dance, lean on a wall, modulate our voices: these are all bound up in queerness. These material, experiential and ephemeral aspects of queerness may not be possible to verbalize, but they are what we mean when we say we are queer.

**Conclusion**

While none of my participants explicitly expressed to me a desire to resist the coming out paradigm, and in fact all of them used “coming out” language during their interviews, the stories

\textsuperscript{38} Tony E. Adams, “Paradoxes of Sexuality, Gay Identity and the Closet,” *Symbolic Interaction* 33.2 (2010), 238.
they told me bore little resemblance to the familiar coming out structure. Over the course of my research, my attitude toward the paradigm of the closet took many turns. I began this project believing that I would use the stories I collected to expand the notion of coming out -- to find room within it to fit all of us. After all, coming out is deeply ingrained within the discourse that surrounds queer lives, and it places us within a historical context. Coming out has been a valuable political tool over the past decades, and the term implies community and pride. That can’t be all bad! And it is not. But the fact is, we’ve gotten too big for the room outside the closet. LGBT and queer communities are growing and evolving, constantly redefining who they encompass and whose stories they should tell. The move toward queerness as a common identifier signals a resistance to the boxes of L, G, B and T, and toward a different common politic and sensibility that has room for anyone who commits themselves to it. So it is no wonder that we are outgrowing the established language that has been used to describe our lives. In fact, the women I interviewed were already developing new languages, though they perhaps did not know it. These narratives and languages will be invaluable tools for activist organizing and building communities. With this paper, I don’t call for a paradigm to replace coming out; I call for more. More language, more stories. More forums, more blogs and zines and safe spaces, more communities and sub-communities, more discussion between them.

This project ultimately taught me two things: Nobody tells their own story wrong. Nobody’s story stands alone. Our new language will grow from the spaces between our narratives, from the resonances and dissonances that queerness, community, friendship and love will prepare us to read and discuss compassionately argue about, and these same forces will prepare us to speak our truths, when we are ready. And we will be without closets.
Appendix

Below is a list of sample questions that I ask my interview participants.

1. How do you primarily identify in terms of your sexuality (queer, bisexual, lesbian, dyke, etc.)? Why does this particular identity resonate with you? Is this the term that you use to describe your sexuality to others? When did you first gain access to this term?

2. Who was the first person you told? Why did you choose this person? Have you told your family? How did they react?

3. Did you know any queer people growing up/in your hometown? What did you think about gay people when you were younger?

4. Do you regard yourself as visibly queer? Do you do anything intentional to increase/decrease/manage this visibility? Are you visible as queer in online spaces? Do you present as more queer in certain settings than others (Oberlin vs. home)? Do you think you can tell if other people are queer?

5. Has your process of coming to identify as queer corresponded to other changes in yourself?

6. Is there anything you would change about your coming out process so far? Was there a moment that you remember as the most exciting or victorious?
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