ABSTRACT

COMING OUT FILMS: SPEECH, CINEMA, AND THE MAKING OF QUEER SUBJECTS

by Samuel Lewis Hunter

Coming out is widely understood as a crucial, repeated scene of a queer person making their queerness known to others. Rather than consider coming out in film as one specific cinematic moment, I argue that the means by which queerness is made legible to the spectator constitutes coming out, even if that coming out is preceded by an outing or occurs non-verbally. Engaging with the speech act theories of J.L. Austin and queer theories of Judith Butler, I trace the performative differences between coming out and outing speech acts in the films *The Children's Hour* (1961) and *Love, Simon* (2018), arguing that outing creates an instable queer subject that must be made coherent through coming out. I also examine how the cinematic apparatus can either construct a closet or allow for non-verbal coming out in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *God's Own Country* (2017), creating a uniquely non-identitarian approach to coming out. The divergent endings met by queer characters in these four films further demonstrate how the process and aftermath of coming out play a role in narrative conclusion, establishing coming out as one of the most critically important aspects of a queer film.

COMING OUT FILMS: SPEECH, CINEMA, AND THE MAKING OF QUEER SUBJECTS

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Samuel Lewis Hunter

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Advisor: Dr. Katie Johnson

Reader: Dr. Elisabeth Hodges

Reader: Dr. Anita Mannur

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by

Samuel Lewis Hunter

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The Department of English

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Dr. Katie Johnson

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Dr. Elisabeth Hodges

____

Dr. Anita Mannur

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Dedication

For Mom & Dad. Thank you.

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1: Coming Out Films: Speech, Cinema, and the Making of Queer Subjects

> Origin stories matter … to us as queer people. Coming out scenes. First crushes. Celebrities we masturbated to. Infatuation with mom's lipstick. Dad's tool belt. Remembering these primal scenes provides us beginnings in a narrative-driven world that doesn't have story arcs to reflect our lives.
>
> —Kareem Khubchandani, *Aunty Fever: A Queer Impression*

Queerness does not begin with coming out, but few other moments in a queer life have more of an impact on the living of that life than the moment at which it is made legible to the self and others. While coming out is not necessarily a singular scene, its crucial and repeated role in beginning the living of a queer life cannot be understated. It is coming out that makes queerness intelligible as an alternative to heterosexual hegemony; in cinematic representation, coming out is the moment at which queerness enters a film's diegetic logic and irreversibly alters the spectator's understanding of the characters therein. This thesis considers cinematic representations of coming out in order to more fully elucidate the process and consequences of coming out in different cinematic and diegetic situations. I will study scenes of coming out including involuntary outing, non-verbal coming out, and the role of the cinematic apparatus; I will also analyze the possibilities articulated by these representations. To begin, I take up the situation of outing in *The Children's Hour* (William Wyler, 1961) and *Love, Simon* (Greg Berlanti, 2018), analyzing how the outing speech act produces subjective instability that requires a subsequent coming out speech act in order to regain subjective coherency. I also examine the presence of a cinematic closet in the films *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and *God's Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2018), detailing how representations of queer characters in regard to their landscape cinematically performs both the closet and the moment of coming out without language. My analysis pays particular attention to the narrative conclusions of the films' protagonists in the aim of drawing a connection between how coming out is navigated and the ultimate fate of the cinematic queer character.

Coming out, at its most basic, is an acknowledgment of queer existence made necessary by hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity (or compulsory heterosexuality, heterosexism, or many other terms all referring to the same hegemonic structure). Queer theorist Sara Ahmed

writes that in a heteronormative society "heterosexuality becomes a script that binds the familial with the global: the coupling of man and woman becomes a kind of 'birthing,' a giving birth not only to new life, but to ways of living that are already recognizable as forms of civilization."[1] Ahmed's description of the performativity of heteronormativity astutely captures how heterosexuality is construed not just as an individual obligation but also a societal one; the birth of the child becomes both the ground and telos of human existence. Numerous theorists including Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman, Michel Foucault, J. Jack Halberstam, Jaclyn Pryor, Adrienne Rich and Michael Warner have demonstrated the pervasive and expansive powers of heteronormativity to control and define virtually every aspect of human existence: bodies, desire, space, time, and more.[2] Such a vast and all-encompassing matrix of discourses creates what Eve Sedgwick terms "the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption" where every individual is, by virtue of living in a heteronormative society, assumed to be heterosexual.[3] This assumption requires the queer subject to either make their queerness known in some way or else exist in the closet, a structure I examine in more depth in chapter 3 of this thesis.

If coming out is partially defined as an operation of resistance to heterosexist presumption, it is also defined by that which it makes legible: queerness. My definition of queerness for the purpose of this thesis assumes not just resistance to the strictures of heteronormativity but also the presence of queer desire, namely same-sex attraction. This is not to deny the possibilities of work which considers queerness as a critical concept outside of gendered desire or to assume any sort of essential qualities to sex or gender: Michele Aaron's study of queer spectatorship, for example, engages with "the critical power of queerness…not to do with its content so much as its stance, its very oppositionality to conservative culture" in order to examine queer inflections in mainstream cinema.[4] I instead focus on considerations of

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[1] Sara Ahmed, "Queer Feelings," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), 423.
[2] On heteronormativity generally, see Ahmed, "Queer Feelings"; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); and Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660. On heteronormativity and space see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547-566 and J. Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). On heteronormativity and time see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*; and Jaclyn Pryor, *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).
[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 68.
[4] Michele Aaron, "The New Queer Spectator," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 198.

queerness still tied to gendered desire as it exists in the lived world, a decision in large part influenced by Sedgwick's centering of same-sex desire in her work. Sedgwick writes that "given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself," arguing for a material consideration of queerness that is necessary for a discussion of coming out.[5] Coming out exists not only because of broad notions of hegemony but because of specific injunctions against the existence and legibility of same-sex desire which simultaneously produce the category, "queer," and mark it as undesirable.

My conception of legible queerness is greatly indebted to the work of Judith Butler, whose writing on identity and the place of the subject in discourse is foundational to my understanding of queerness and coming out. Butler's conception of performative sex and gender norms (and therefore, performative sexuality) argues that there is no subject outside or prior to discourse, but rather that the subject is only made intelligible through a hegemonic, homogenizing discourse which forces bodies to perform their best approximation of the norm or be otherwise marked as deviant. The process of identification is thus not essentially grounded or freely chosen, purely individual or utterly out of one's control, but instead an ongoing and slippery process of relation to repeated acts and preexisting discourse:

> Identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation; they unsettle the "I"; they are the sedimentation of the "we" in the constitution of any "I," the structuring presence of alterity in the very formulation of the "I." Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested, and, on occasion, compelled to give way.[6]

To be legibly queer, then, is not to absent oneself from the controlling discourse of heteronormativity (which is impossible) but instead to respond differently to its norms than the subject which attempts to emulate them. Indeed, Butler argues that "it is only *within* the practices

[5] Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8. Emphasis original.
[6] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 105.

of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible."[7] Butler is careful to acknowledge that such subversive repetitions are made difficult by the hegemonic discourses within which they exist that attempt to control the boundaries of intelligibility while claiming a natural foundation (i.e. heteronormativity):

> The substantive "I" only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalize its effects. Further, to qualify as a substantive identity is an arduous task, for such appearances are rule-generated identities, ones which rely on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that condition and restrict culturally intelligible practices of identity. Indeed, to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life.[8]

Queer subjective legibility is therefore not simply about a single act, but rather a series of repeated acts that constitute a practice signifying queerness. Coming out is thus not a singular act but a *category* of acts which make queerness legible. The acts that are included in this category cannot be finitely listed but are instead constantly changing in relation to societal, historical, and individual contexts. These contexts determine not only how coming out is received but also how it occurs: one adult man coming out to another in a gay bar in the late 2010s likely occurs very differently from a young teenage lesbian coming out to her mother in the 1980s. The coming out of a fictional character is also different depending not just on those contexts but also those of medium, genre, and any other number of factors involved the artistic production of a fictional character.

This is particularly true when considering cinematic representations of queerness rather than the manifold expressions of queerness in the lived world. A queer film is a film before it is queer; that is, while queerness is a concept that cannot be contained by any one ideology or medium, films are produced via a capitalist industry imbricated in certain ideologies. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni remind us that "because every film is part of the economic system it is

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[7] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), 185. Emphasis original.
[8] Butler, 184. Emphasis original.

also a part of the ideological system, for 'cinema' and 'art' are branches of ideology."[9] While this is true of all films, queer films are especially caught up in heteronormativity just as queers are, mandating that a cinematic character is assumed to be heterosexual until they come out. However, while the real-world queer is certainly capable of living a queer life partially ensconced in the closet, heterosexist presumption mandates that a cinematic character is heterosexual until they come out to the spectator. While a rich and vigorous history exists of queer readings of ostensibly heterosexual characters (see Aaron, Dyer, Russo), an unambiguously queer character cannot exist without coming out in some form—an argument which is the central contention of this thesis. Studying cinematic coming out is thus not just a study of the coming out scene, but a study of how queerness is made legible on the screen, which is therefore how the queer character becomes queer for the spectator. Without coming out there can only be queer*ing* that is fully dependent on the whims and desires of the spectator rather than queerness which is fully legible and entirely undeniable.

As mentioned above, this process of making queerness legible on the screen differs across historical and national contexts. Although Vito Russo notes the possibility of queer inflections in American experimental films as early as 1895, many of the first highly legible queer films came from the Weimar Republic era of Germany (1918-1933).[10] Barbara Mennel describes the period as a time when "homosexuals were everywhere: not just in bars, dance houses and cabarets but also in literature, painting and film."[11] The Weimar era brought about many of the first feature-length films with legible queerness, including *Anders als die Anderen/Different from the Others* (Richard Oswald, 1919), *Die Büchse der Pandora/Pandora's Box* (Georg Wilhelm Pabst, 1929), and *Mädchen in Uniform/Girls in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), a period of relatively progressive representation brought to an abrupt end by the rise of Nazism. American films were generally more demure during the same period, although the comic male "sissy" and the occasional presence of crossdressing kept hints of queerness alive on the screen until the institution of the Motion Picture Production Code throughout the 1930s made the closet a rule rather than a suggestion. The Code explicitly banned all but the most loosely

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[9] Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," in *Film Theory & Criticism* Seventh Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 688.
[10] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality at the Movies Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 6.
[11] Barbara Mennel, *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires, and Gay Cowboys* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 6.

implied references to queerness and was enforced through a censorship process that Russo says "laundered [queerness] off the screen for the better part of half a century."[12] Although some films featured queer coding such as *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948) and *Tea and Sympathy* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956), queerness was so barely legible in those films as to only be intelligible to the purposefully searching spectator. Although the Production Code ended in the 1960s, films featuring queerness as anything other than a predatory or comical trope were few and far between until the New Queer Cinema (NQC) movement of the early 1990s. This wave of independent films including *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1991), and *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992) were described by B. Ruby Rich as all displaying a "Homo Pomo" (i.e., homosexual postmodern) aesthetic:

> Call it 'Homo Pomo': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure. They're here, they're queer, get hip to them.[13]

Although the NQC is generally considered to have ended within a couple years of its genesis, the critical success and relative acceptance of NQC films at festivals such as Sundance allowed for legible queerness to appear with increasing frequency in American and international films. Nor are post-NQC queer films all indie darlings; films such as *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols, 1996) and *Chasing Amy* (Kevin Smith, 1997) packaged queerness for mainstream audiences, while more serious films such as *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) and *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008) garnered Academy Awards for stars Hilary Swank and Sean Penn. *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) became the first legibly queer film to win the Oscar for Best Picture, a stamp of mainstream approval that was memorably bungled by the show's producers in an unintentional sign that the ascension of queer cinema to public approval was still a work in progress.[14]

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[12] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 63.

[13] B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 16.

[14] Award presenters Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway were handed an incorrect envelope that lead them to mistakenly announce Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* as the Best Picture winner; several *La La Land* producers made acceptance speeches before the error was acknowledged.

The films I analyze at length in this thesis are, except for *The Children's Hour*, post-NQC films. Aaron argues that the NQC's primary effect on mainstream attitudes is that audiences became free to participate in "consensual flirtation with gender and sexual ambiguity" rather than assume that any queer valences in a film would ultimately be disavowed.[15] While the relationship between a film's temporal proximity to the NQC and the legibility of queerness is not strictly correlational, it is no accident that post-NQC films frequently offer the richest, most nuanced depictions of coming out. Heteronormativity requires that queer cinema always be framed in terms of legibility, from the tentative gestures of the pre-Code era throughout the Code's stifling censorship and into the stark openness of the NQC and the films that followed. While this thesis is primarily a theoretical endeavor, I believe that a theoretical apprehension of cinematic coming out gestures towards a historical tradition of understanding queer cinema through legibility. Before queer films can be analyzed through for their queer content they must first be understood *to be queer*, which requires some form of coming out.[16] The different processes and outcomes of coming out also reflect historical change that, while not strictly linear, has generally reflected an increase in the number, quality and variety of queer characters and a greater acceptance of those characters by non-queer spectators. My theoretical investigation thus has a political aim in tracing the different possibilities for coming out: by analyzing the different ways a cinematic character can come out and the different results produced, I am hoping to articulate new ways for queerness to be made legible in film. Queer characters can and should exist in films not centrally occupied with coming out or with queer romance, but the reach of heteronormativity and the power of the Hollywood machine ensures that any character that does not come out is assumed to be heterosexual. This study of coming out is therefore intended both to increase the critical understanding of cinematic coming out and to encourage filmmakers to continue to develop more frequent and diverse ways of representing coming out, increasing the variety of what cinematic imagination can make possible.

My analysis is divided into two sections based upon the type of cinematic coming out being examined. Chapter 2 takes up the situation of spoken coming out in the films *The Children's Hour* and *Love, Simon*, two films that prominently deploy dialogic language in order

[15] Aaron, "The New Queer Spectator," 187.
[16] The exception is for the type of historical tracing practiced by Russo in regard to Production Code-era films, which by definition preclude coming out. Analyses of queerness in these films is still oriented around a search for legibly queer signs, though, even if those signs don't necessarily include the overtly-legible coming out moments I analyze in this thesis.

to figure coming out. I analyze the spoken language of both films in the context of speech act theory, unpacking how their historically-contingent use of coming out speech acts leads to divergent narrative consequences for their characters. Both films also prominently feature situations of involuntary outing, allowing for an examination of the differences between a coming out speech act intentionally voiced by the queer subject and an outing speech act whose object is queer. Chapter 3 then considers the situation of nonverbal coming out in *Brokeback Mountain* and *God's Own Country* to consider how cinematic techniques such as the placement of the camera, the operation of suture, and *mise-en-scène* might "do" the work of making characters legibly queer to the spectator. I pay special attention to the location of both character and spectator in the cinematic landscape, arguing that the cinematic apparatus is capable of fashioning rural space into either a closet or an open queer space. I then end with a short summation of my insights as well as sketches of possible directions for additional inquiry, such as the possibility for an intersectional analysis of coming out, the specific moves entailed in transgender coming out, and the use of coming out as narrative trope.

2: The Spoken Language of Coming Out & Outing: *The Children's Hour* & *Love, Simon*

> To be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible.
>
> —Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*

Although coming out is not an exclusively linguistic operation, language frequently occupies a crucial position in several points of the process of coming out. The power of speech acts to create legible social identities—and indeed, to make distinct and discrete social identities possible—makes an analysis of such language crucial to any study of coming out, cinematic or otherwise. In fact, a study of specifically cinematic coming out only makes the study of speech acts more necessary; film theorist Mary Ann Doane notes how "the addition of sound to the cinema introduces the possibility of re-presenting a fuller (and organically unified) body, and of confirming the status of speech as an individual property right."[17] If language plays an integral role in both the formation of social identity and the process of cinematic expression, it is necessary to study the performative role of language in coming out films. In this chapter I examine the role of language in the production of queer identity in *The Children's Hour* (1961) and *Love, Simon* (2018), paying particular attention to the differences between coming out and being outed. Despite being operationally similar, I argue that coming out and outing are fundamentally different processes with divergent narrative consequences due to their particular productions of queer subjectivity. I argue that outing creates a subjectively unstable situation caused by the production of a queer sign that doesn't necessarily map onto a coherent queer subject, creating an injurious situation that requires further navigation for subjective and narrative resolution. The outing situation is resolved differently in each film, offering the opportunity to trace the possibilities for an outed individual across the societal difference created by over fifty years of societal change.

Performative language is generally understood as words that *do* something in their utterance rather than simply describing or informing the listener of an extra-linguistic action.

[17] Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 34.

This approach is largely drawn from the work of philosopher J.L. Austin, whose seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* outlines the performative contours of language in great detail. His most well-known example of performative language is the use of the phrase, "I do," in the typical Western Christian marriage ceremony, where speaking the words, "I do," *does* the act of marriage rather than describing a state of marriage. Austin evaluates these performatives as either succeeding or failing in their effect; a case of a performative "gone wrong" is not false, it is unhappy or infelicitous.[18] A felicitous statement is not a "true" statement, but rather a statement which succeeds in bringing about an intended effect. The exchanged "I do" of marital ceremony succeeds when both speakers are capable of marrying and speak with the intent to marry. Austin places a great deal of importance on the circumstances of the utterance, claiming that a marriage ceremony conducted as part of a play fails to wed the speaking actors due to contextual infelicity: the actors do not intend to actually wed and thus their speaking of "I do" does not wed them.

While Austin's metric of felicitous/infelicitous might accurately capture the performative exchange of a marriage ceremony, I question the use of this criterion in relation to expression of queer identity in the form of a coming out speech act. It is my contention that the coming out speech act cannot be felicitous or infelicitous in the case of outing, meaning a situation where an individual is identified as queer by another, rather than by coming out themselves. This is because outing is *always both* felicitous and infelicitous; successful in producing a performative queer identity about the object of the utterance but failing to necessarily produce a coherent queer subject. The truth or falsity of the outing—i.e., whether the outed person is in fact queer—is irrelevant at the moment of speaking, because what is produced via perlocutionary effect is a sign of queerness that functions independently of the actual feelings or desires of the named individual. This gap between the individual and the sign assigned to them results in an unstable subject: a person recognized as queer who does not themselves claim the label.

The notion of an unstable subject is endemic in queer theory, which has in recent decades leaned in to the notion of gendered and sexual identity as performatively constituted phenomena lacking essential grounding largely credited to Judith Butler. It would therefore be useful to locate my argument within not just Austinian speech act theory, but also within Butler's formulation of identity as a process of hailing (a concept she borrows from Althusser), a term

[18] J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 14.

which on its face might appear to have some applicability to a discussion of outing. Butler writes that "to qualify as a substantive identity is an arduous task … [relying] on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that condition and restrict culturally intelligible practices of identity," identifying the ways in which discourse creates both the foundations and culturally acceptable boundaries of identity, resulting in a subject that is always unstable.[19] Nor is this instability specifically queer: Butler describes heterosexuality as "beset by an anxiety that it can never be finally or fully achieved," an anxiety that necessitates heterosexuality's incessant self-policing as a dominant discourse.[20] The question could then be asked: if all subjects are unstable in their sexual identities, how does outing create a specifically unstable subject?

Butler's own analyses of language offer some insights into the destabilizing powers of outing. She writes that "language is not *an exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self," directly implicating language in the process of self-making that might lead to an understanding of queer identity.[21] Language is not outside of the process of forming sexual identity: language is as thoroughly enmeshed in the formulation of queer identity as desire itself. Butler also identifies a type of language she calls injurious speech, a form of linguistic injury she partially defines as experiencing a destabilizing loss of context. The disorientation produced by injurious speech is, for Butler, a moment that opens a new future while simultaneously destabilizing both the past and the present, dismantling the sense of place of the injured person.[22] Synthesizing these arguments produces a formulation of identity that is fundamentally caught up in language, thus making one's sense of identity particularly vulnerable to the performative effects of language. While all sexual identities might share some inherent instability, the possibility of injurious language adds a new dimension of instability: that is, instability beyond the quotidian, beyond the manageable.

Queer identities are also located in a particularly precarious position due to their marginalized position within modern culture. Heterosexuality is so enmeshed in our constitutive cultural fabric as to have some resilience against injurious language. Eve Sedgwick's memorable comparison of heterosexuality to the Christmas holiday in America identifies the plethora of discourses—"religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, the discourses of power and

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[19] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), 184.
[20] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 125.
[21] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 183. Emphasis original.
[22] Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York & London, Routledge, 1997), 4.

legitimacy"—which work to signify monolithically, creating an interlocking system by which heterosexuality is understood as an all-encompassing institution wrapped in bows and ribbons as well as an individual identification.[23] This is not to say that queerness exists "only" in language, nor that heterosexuals are perfectly immune to injurious language or incapable of experiencing subjective instability. Rather, I am suggesting that the pervasive nature of compulsory heterosexuality has created a sliding scale of linguistic vulnerability which leaves queer people particularly vulnerable to unmanageable subjective instability.[24] This is due to the structures and pressures of the closet, which operate at multiple levels and produce unique vulnerabilities in different queer subjects. While the relationship between closeting and vulnerability is not strictly correlated, examining the relationship between the two offers a return to a discussion on the performative effects of outing.

The process of outing is necessarily dependent on the sort of closet that is being dismantled: social or psychological. Harry M. Benshoff offers a typology of the closet juxtaposing these two dimensions that highlights the sometimes-fluid movement between differing categories:

> (1) individuals may be both psychologically and socially out of the closet. However, being out still means negotiating various closets on a daily basis, and thus type (1) queer male identity blurs into type (2), the state of being self-consciously queer but socially closeted. Still other queer individuals might be (3) psychologically in the closet but socially out, a seemingly rare situation in which friends and family recognize queerness in an individual before he does. Finally, there are individuals who are (4) both unconsciously queer and, as a result of that, socially closeted as well.[25]

Benshoff's typology is not exhaustive, but it offers a useful starting point for an analysis of the effects of outing on a queer subject. While any subject is vulnerable to injurious speech and any queer subject is perhaps more so, outing takes on a specific injurious power in relation to the individual being outed. While a type (1) individual is certainly not immune from being injured

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[23] Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 6.

[24] A subject's position on the scale of vulnerability is also influenced by additional social factors such as race, gender, ability and class; see Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), and Louise Wallenberg, "New Black Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron, (New Burnswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

[25] Harry M. Benshoff, "Reception of A Queer Mainstream Film," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 174.

by outing, they are more likely to effectively manage the resultant instability than a type (2), (3), or (4) person. The film *J'ai tué ma mère/I Killed My Mother* (Xavier Dolan, 2009) depicts such a situation, where the main character, a young gay man named Hubert, is outed to his mother by his boyfriend's mother. Although the outing creates a situation of instability between Hubert and his mother, Hubert's self-consciousness of his queerness and otherwise-uncloseted life allow him to easily move past the moment of outing, which is subsumed into the film's overall narrative arc rather than creating rupture. The outing speech act still operated as both felicitous and infelicitous in its creation of a queer sign attached to Hubert independent of his immediate actions, but his quick claiming of the sign negated its destabilizing power.

The situations warranting longer analysis are, then, those where outing produces great instability through a lack of quick reconciliation. It is in these cases where the linguistic operations of outing are most evident and where significant amounts of cinematic time are devoted to navigations of outing and its subsequent effect. *The Children's Hour* and *Love, Simon* are both films that feature outing as key narrative features, enabling an analysis that traces how linguistic outing works necessitates a second coming out which, in some ways, determines the queer subject's ultimate fate.

"So Damn Sick and Dirty:" *The Children's Hour*

> *The Children's Hour* is not about lesbianism, [sic] it's about the power of lies to destroy people's lives.
>
> —William Wyler, Director of *The Children's Hour*[26]

The Children's Hour was released in 1961 during the twilight of the Motion Picture Production Code that kept all but the subtlest signs of queerness off the silver screen between 1930 and 1961.[27] Based on a 1934 play by Lillian Hellman that was in turn based on a Scottish news story, the film depicts two boarding school teachers, Martha (Shirley MacLaine) and Karen

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[26] Quoted in Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 126.

[27] Although the Code was first introduced in 1930, it wasn't strictly enforced until 1934 under pressure from the Catholic Church. Similarly, the Code was not fully dismantled in 1961, but merely amended to allow "homosexuality and other sexual aberrations" to be depicted "with care, discretion and restraint." For more, see Russo, *The Celluloid* Closet, 31, 121-122.

(Audrey Hepburn), who have been close friends since college. After being sharply disciplined by Karen for telling a minor lie, a student named Mary tells her wealthy, influential grandmother that her teachers are lesbians. The film traces the aftermath of Mary's lie: all of Martha and Karen's students withdraw from their school and Karen is forced to break off her engagement to a handsome young doctor, Joe (James Garner). Although Mary's lie is eventually exposed, Martha confesses that she has in fact experienced feelings for Karen. Saying that she "feels so damn sick and dirty," Martha dashes upstairs and hangs herself; her funeral concludes the film.

Director William Wyler insisted that the film was not "about" lesbians, but merely used same-sex desire as a vehicle to explore the consequences of lies. While Wyler might have been completely sincere, it's notable that he had previously adapted Hellman's play in 1936 under the title *These Three*, a version of the same story completely stripped of queerness where Martha is in love with Joe instead of Martha. His decision to remake the film *with* lesbian content suggests some acknowledgment that the specific "lie" of outing adds a compelling dimension to the film. It's also significant that there's no death in the *These Three* adaptation: rather than commit suicide, Martha urges Karen to reunite with Joe and the films ends more-or-less happily. Outing is not just any lie in *The Children's Hour*, but a lethal one.

Mary's lie to her grandmother demonstrates how the outing speech act is not dependent on the immediate context of the act's speaker or object but is instead dependent on broader social and cultural contexts. Mary first tells her grandmother that Martha is jealous of Karen's engagement. When Mary clarifies that Martha is jealous of the *man* Karen is marrying, her grandmother responds that she doesn't understand. "Neither do I," Mary replies, "But [another teacher] said that it was *unnatural* for a woman to feel that way." Her use of the word "unnatural" provokes a sharp glare; when Mary uses it again, she urges her to stop. While Mary's use of "unnatural" clearly unnerves her, it lacks the performative force necessary for outing for the grandmother. The actual outing speech act is unknown; Mary claims that she must whisper it and although she is shown cupping her hand around her grandmother's ear and leaning in, her words are not heard by the spectator. Discordant music crescendos as the grandmother reacts with shock; the outing has been accomplished. She immediately withdraws Mary from the school and begins to counsel others to do the same.

Mary's utterance is thus felicitous in that Martha and Karen are identified as queer by her words. But the success of this utterance runs contrary to the intended social effects of coming

out, which is to establish an identity that the speaker has chosen for themself. Linguist A.C. Liang writes that coming out brings "a new gay self into being … alter[ing] social reality by creating a community of listeners," noting that coming out is based around achieving social resignification.[28] Deborah Chirrey cites Liang to argue that coming out is an "interactional" exchange between speaker and hearer, where the "force of the act intends that the previous status quo be erased and that a new world-view would replace it."[29] While Mary's utterance certainly creates the sign of gay selves for Martha and Karen and thus alters their social reality, these new gay selves are incompatible with their status quo that refuses to be erased. Martha and Karen both vehemently reject the identities Mary attempts to force upon them. Martha calls the grandmother a "crazy old woman" for spreading Mary's words, insisting "It's just not true! Not one single word of it!" She exclaims "we're standing here defending ourselves against what? Against nothing. Against a lie, a great, awful lie." While Martha might be correct that Mary's words were untruthful, her failure to recognize the performative power of the young girl's words dooms their efforts at redress; they file a libel lawsuit against the grandmother that fails because while the injury against them is evident, they are unable to prove that they are not, in fact, lesbians.

The outing speech act here is operationally similar to the coming out speech act but with an injurious twist. Butler considers the coming out speech act in the context of the U.S. military's now-repealed Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, writing that the policy's regulations construe the words, "I am a homosexual" as homosexual conduct; that is, a self-declaration of homosexuality is equivalent to performing homosexual sex acts. Butler also writes that the conflation of act and conduct "imagines the singularity of the event as a series of events…and so imagines a certain force of homosexuality to drive the one-time practitioner into a compulsive or regular repetition."[30] The unknown words Mary whispers invoke a history of sex acts that, in the context of the film's mid-twentieth century setting, create an identity that is not just queer, but also predatory. Her words also act injuriously upon Karen and Martha, whose past close friendship has now been weaponized against them in the present to fully unravel their sense of temporal place, leaving only an uncertain and unstable future.

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[28] A.C. Liang. "The Creation of Coherence in Coming-Out Stories," in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Anna Livia & Kira Hall (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 293.
[29] Deborah Chirrey, "'I hereby come out': What sort of speech act is coming out?," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, no. 1 (2003): 30.
[30] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 111.

This situation highlights the performative slippage of outing. Mary's outing successfully constitutes Martha and Karen as lesbians to the hearers of her utterance: her grandmother and the other parents and caretakers who make up the community's social field. Her utterance is thus felicitous. But Martha and Karen's refusal to embrace the new social order creates infelicity; part of the promise of the outing utterance remains unfulfilled. Outing is also then defined as different from the coming out speech act, both for its injurious nature and the fact that a queer speaker is rendered unnecessary. Although both acts rely on the necessity of performative language, outing is not interactional. The objects of outing—in this case, Martha and Karen—have no social space in which to speak due to the partial felicity of their outing. They are thus stranded in a space between, unable to return to a pre-outing status quo but equally unable to become the queer subjects they are believed to be.

It's also notable that while the utterance that finalizes the outing is unknown, Mary's use of the word "unnatural" comes directly from an earlier scene in the film where Martha argues with her Aunt Lily (Miriam Hopkins), who teaches elocution at their school. Lily claims that Martha is always in a bad mood while Joe is visiting, saying, "You've always had a jealous, possessive nature, even as a child. If you had a friend, you'd be upset if she liked anybody else. And that's what's happening now. And it's *unnatural*. It's just as *unnatural* as it can be." Their argument is overheard by two girls who happen to be Mary's roommates and tell her about Lily's use of the word "unnatural" to describe Martha. Martha's outing is thus especially destabilizing: some sort of queerness was recognized in her before she was aware, recalling type (3) in Benshoff's typology. Her situation is not simply that of refuting an injurious lie but navigating the injury while also attempting to reconcile the queer valences of her past actions. While both women are similarly socially affected by Mary's outing, it's Martha whose sense of subjective self is under the greatest strain.

Although Martha and Karen initially attempt to return to their status quo, the outing takes a significant toll on their subjective identities. Karen's fiancé, Joe, initially holds no faith in Mary's accusation; he even goes as far as to offer to leave the area with both women and establish a new life in a different town. But their relationship is unable to persist in the changed social field: during an argument with Karen, Joe remarks that everything he says, "is made to mean something else." Their argument concerns Joe's repeated insistence that he believes Karen when she claims she is heterosexual. Joe appears to be sincere, but Karen insists that, "saying it

again won't do it…things would never be right between us." She claims that a part of him is unable to completely ignore Mary's words and thus Karen is the one who breaks off the engagement.

During the argument, Karen says, "Every word has a new meaning," a reference to her changed social situation that in fact obscures the linguistic issue underlying their argument. Joe cannot forget about Mary's words due to what Derrida calls the iterability of language. Derrida wrote in a critique of Austin that "every sign…can be *cited*…in so doing it can break with every given context." [31] The sign carries a trace of its original injurious context into every new context, such as Karen and Joe's relationship. Once the outing speech act has been uttered, the sign of lesbianism that is created carries meaning from its initial context and remains inexplicably tied to the women despite any subsequent utterances or actions. It's no accident that this iterative process is particularly powerful when the speech act is also injurious; as the outed individual's own sense of context is destabilized by the injurious speech act, the performative force of the iterative speech act is able to grow. Although the social and judicial fields remain flexible—Mary's grandmother promises to award a libel settlement when Mary's lie is exposed—the social sign of queerness is more difficult to dislodge from a fractured social/linguistic zone where the outing act's injurious and iterative force lends it much strength.

Martha's coming out followed by her suicide follows from the same iterability of her forced queer identity. Martha frames her coming out within the context of the outing; she says, "I couldn't call it by name before but maybe it's been there since I first knew you." She wonders if Mary "sensed" queerness that she herself was unaware of, calling Mary's outing utterance "the lie with the ounce of truth." The film sidesteps invoking the trope of homosexuality-as-contagion through Karen's continued identification as heterosexual; she breaks off her engagement with Joe not because she questions her sexuality, but because of the social sign of queerness between them.[32] Martha's coming out finally fulfills the performative promise of Mary's outing: a queer subject is produced. Martha's discomfort with queer identity is immediate, however. She weeps profusely while blaming herself for the closure of their school and the end of Karen's engagement before killing herself. Martha's suicide is not just an effect of being outed, but an effect of *coming out*, what Austin would call the perlocutionary effect of her words. Although

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[31] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 9-10. Emphasis original.
[32] For more on homosexuality-as-contagion, see Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

Karen's life is irrevocably altered by her "outing," her apparent lack of queerness allows her to maintain a certain level of subjective integrity that differs from Martha's complete subjective disintegration. Martha's coming out reconciles the instability of being outed but it also condemns her to death, her understanding of her queerness too bound up in discourses of sickness and self-disgust. Coming out and death are inextricably bound together: Karen does not come out and so she is able to live.

The outing speech act in *The Children's Hour* is generative even beyond Mary's intentions, leading not just to the intended instability but also to Martha's coming out and subsequent demise. Shoshana Felman describes the relationship between the body and the speech act it produces as a "scandal consist[ing] in the fact that the act cannot *know what it is doing*, that the act (of language) subverts both consciousness and knowledge (of language)."[33] Felman is referring to performative language's ability to become endlessly self-referential and thus produce unintended effects, "the way a language has of referring to itself and at the very same time of missing its own self-referentiality, by carrying its referring beyond itself towards reality."[34] Mary's outing speech act is self-referential and citational: although she claims a referent in the affective bond between Karen and Martha it is ultimately *her words* which begin and then constitute the lesbian scandal that engulfs both women. Even though her exact words are unknown to the spectator and presumably to any individual except her grandmother, their citationality allows their performative power to extend beyond Mary's intended frame—to get back at her teachers for a minor punishment—and result in the wholesale destruction of both women's lives. Martha's coming out and subsequent suicide is thus performatively referential to Mary's words, a direct chain of knowledge and signification that ends with her death.

Of course, suicide is not the inevitable result of outing or of coming out. But Martha's death can be read as a direct contradiction of a notable exchange immediately preceding Martha's coming out speech. Karen exclaims, "this isn't a new sin they say we've done, other people haven't been destroyed by it," the unspoken "it" obviously being homosexuality. Martha replies, "they're the people who believe in it, who want it, who have chosen it for themselves. We aren't like that." The patently homophobic "choice" rhetoric aside, Martha's words appear to offer a hopeful note: homosexuality isn't inherently destructive if one embraces it. Russo notes

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[33] Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L Austin or Seduction in Two Languages* New Edition, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 67. Emphasis original.
[34] Felman, 63.

that the statement was interpreted as "condoning lesbianism, albeit surreptitiously" in a homophobic review in *Films in Review*, indicating that at least some spectators understood her words as queer-positive.[35] But this moment is completely undone through the film's conclusion, where it's Martha's self-realization of her queerness that leads to her death. Martha *does* choose her queerness for herself when she speaks it into existence, her final monologue marking the only moment at which any character on the screen claims queer identity even obliquely. The logical line is unmistakable: outing can be survived if one maintains at least a façade of heterosexuality but coming out is a death sentence. And it's a queer death sentence at that: Martha's hanging body is only shown in the partial silhouette of the shadow of her feet dangling above the ground; the brutality of her demise is registered only via Karen's wrecked, weeping face. Her death is unmistakable but still visually concealed, her dead queer body kept off-screen.

The Children's Hour's lethal conclusion unfortunately set a standard for the treatment of visibly queer characters in mainstream films. Russo calls Martha's death "the first in a long series of suicides of homosexual screen characters," a list so long that he ends his book with a macabre "necrology" of over forty-five queer characters who died in films released from the 1930's through 1980's.[36] Nor has the modern era been categorically kinder to queer characters, with major, award-winning films such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *The Danish Girl* (2015) all deploying queer death as narrative conclusion. While *The Children's Hour* was one of the first films to chart the injurious structure of outing, it did so at a cost for the queer character who was outed that, while not necessarily bearing complete responsibility, signaled that queer visibility was coterminous with tragedy.

I Wanna Dance with Somebody: *Love, Simon*

> The problem, for so many already-out homosexuals, is that the coming out novel or film is no longer fresh, says nothing new, and is often not emotionally, physically, or artistically challenging.
>
> —Michael Bronski, "Positive Images and the Coming Out Film"

[35] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 140.
[36] Russo, 139, 347-349.

Although it was heralded as the first same-sex romantic comedy distributed by a major film studio, 2018's *Love, Simon* is far from the first film to make a coming-of-age film about coming out. Michael Bronski claims that films such as *Edge of Seventeen* (1998) and *But I'm A Cheerleader* (1999) offer "a simple continuous—affirmative vision … [where] coming out is, in fact, not only an end in itself, but *the* end to this singular narrative."[37] *Love, Simon* is admittedly a less-than-radical film in its artistic ambitions, particularly when compared against queer contemporaries such as *Tangerine* (2015), *The Handmaiden* (2016), *Moonlight* (2016), or *The Favourite* (2018). Pop culture writer Jacob Tobia correctly located the film in a tradition where "gay men can be sexy protagonists—as long as they are masculine gay men," calling into question the presentation of the titular character, played by Nick Robinson, as "not *that kind* of gay."[38] But despite these inadequacies, *Love, Simon* does offer an extended view into an outing that, unlike *The Children's Hour*, is happily resolved rather than deferred to the grave. While this narrative arc is perhaps trite to some, it also foregrounds the moves necessary for Simon to successfully navigate a linguistic outing. *Love, Simon* might not have anything new to say, but it is certainly new in *how* it says it, at least for a mainstream film.

The film opens with an expository soliloquy as Simon glosses his life to the audience via voice-over. A montage of scenes with synchronous dialogue fills the gaps between the voice-over, the images of upper-middle class, white domestic life expanding upon the narrative advanced by Simon's voice-over. Even though the film extensively uses voice-over to represent the inner voice of Simon and other characters, the tight relationship between the narrator's words and his body within the frame maintains organic unity; all spoken words can be located in a diegetic body. Doane writes that the pervasive attachment of asynchronous dialogue to a body creates a displacement by which "the body *in* the film becomes the body *of* the film."[39] Although Simon's voice can be returned to his body on the screen, the mix of synchronous and voice-over dialogue intertwines Simon's subjectivity with the film's sonic register, establishing the film as a representative vehicle for Simon's subjective experience from the first moments.

While Simon is unable to attach a name to his secret, he is aware of the conceptual space of his gay desires. He ends his monologue by saying, "Like I said, I'm just like you. I have a

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[37] Michael Bronski, "Positive Images and the Coming Out Film: The Art and Politics of Gay and Lesbian Cinema," *Cineaste* 26, no. 1 (2001): 20. Emphasis original.
[38] Jacob Tobia, "Does Gay Hollywood Have Room for Queer Kids?," *The New York Times,* March 28, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/opinion/love-simon-gay-femme-hollywood.html. Emphasis original.
[39] Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema," 35. Emphasis original.

total, perfectly normal life. Except, I have one huge ass secret." In a scene immediately after the monologue concludes, Simon awkwardly attempts to start a flirtatious conversation with a nearby muscled landscape worker. Simon is aware of his gay desire even if he can't name it, which the film represents by deploying a frequent trope in gay cinema of using camera movement to represent "hypervisible and unsayable" gay desires. Florian Grandena writes that this trope creates an alternative cinematic language that "place[s] spectators in a permanent state of frustration and unbalance similar to the protagonist's."[40] This move offers the spectator a visualization of Simon's unsayable gay subjectivity, recreating the limits of the closet in visual representation.

By even acknowledging the structure of the closet, *Love, Simon* opens with a fundamentally different understanding of queerness than *The Children's Hour*. Sedgwick writes that the closet—or the state of gay self-knowledge without public acknowledgment—is "a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence … that accrues particularity by fits and starts," a useful reminder that coming out is rarely, if ever, a one-time event.[41] Although Simon is closeted to his friends and family, he is openly gay to not just himself, but also to the spectator, who is offered access to his queer desires through the highlighted presence of his subjectivity in the film. Even though his gayness is not named via a speech act, queer desire is sutured into the film's opening moments, changing the spectator's terms of engagement with queerness and the closet. Coming out is thus not the end point of *Love, Simon*, but its beginning, at least with respect to the spectator, who is situated right alongside Simon, peeking outside the closet door.

The closet is further elucidated by the presence of a second queer character, Ethan. Although Ethan's primary role is as a femme foil to Simon's "not *that* gay" normality, an early scene depicting the former's coming out serves to demonstrate the possibilities of coming out to rewrite the closet's rules. The scene is presented as humorous: Ethan announces that he is gay with dramatic flair and the camera turns to capture his friends effusively claiming that they "had no idea," the joke being that *of course* everyone already knew that Ethan was gay. Despite the problematic humor, the scene serves to demonstrate the performative qualities of language to negotiate one's relationship to the closet—including coming out of it. Although Ethan was

[40] Florian Grandena. "Zooming In, Coming Out: Languages in Oliver Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's *Ma vraie vie à Rouen/The True Story of my Life in Rouen* (2003)," *Studies in French Cinema* 9, no. 1 (2009): 83-84.
[41] Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

widely understood as being queer by his peers—situation (3) of Benshoff's typology—a verbal coming out was necessary to "seal the deal" and allow Ethan to successfully come out to his friends. Simon describes Ethan's situation as "easy," and while his statement is clearly a blatant misreading of the situation of femme queer men, it does articulate Simon's central concern about coming out: that it will signify a moment from which there is no return, an abrupt severing of the past from the new queer future.

It's interesting to position Simon's fear of queer change in conversation with the performative moment of outing in *The Children's Hour*. Although Simon is not yet concerned with being outed at the beginning of the film—his queerness still being a secret known only to himself—he repeatedly asserts that doesn't want things to change; when he does later come out to his parents, he immediately states, "I don't want you guys to think anything different, I'm still me." This fear hearkens back to the procedure of outing/coming out in *The Children's Hour* as an injurious speech act that destabilizes past and present contexts and thus hurtles the outed individual into an uncertain future. Simon attempts to navigate this future with a linguistic claim to his past identity, attempting to retain some measure of subjective coherency.[42] He's aware of this pending change throughout the film because of his queer self-awareness, a situation that enables great self-situation than was available to Martha. Simon is aware of the change that is coming when he is outed and is prepared for the social consequences before they occur.

Before he is outed, though, Simon first comes out to a close friend in a scene which frames his eventual public outing. The moment is deceptively simple: while alone in a car with his friend, Abby (Alexandra Shipp), Simon matter-of-factly says, "Abby, I'm gay." The scene is tenderly scored and shot in a two-shot close-up to emphasize its intimate nature but the operative speech acts are short and to the point. Although the film deploys a shot/reverse-shot structure to emphasize the speaker, the listener is foregrounded in shallow focus to keep both of them in the frame during the crucial part of the coming out exchange. Abby responds to Simon's coming out with a quiet "oh" and a soft smile, making her acceptance easily known while also framing the moment as practically mundane; when Simon asks if she suspected or was surprised she first demurs and then turns the question back, asking, "do you want me to be surprised?" Simon's

[42] This attempt is undoubtedly influenced by Simon's constant positioning throughout the film as "not that gay." By stressing subjective coherency throughout coming out, Simon maintains a proximal relationship to the heteronormative masculinity he (partially) performed while in the closet. This is not to say that *any* attempts to maintain subjective coherency while coming out are inherently a claim to heteronormativity, merely to acknowledge that this specific positioning of the film's main character might have multiple motivations.

coming out utterance was clearly felicitous by Austin's terms in that Abby now understands Simon to be gay, but her response and the film's simple framing work to naturalize the moment. The performative force of coming out thus doesn't necessarily need to carry *dramatic* force, recalling Felman's point that "the tragic and the comic both stem in fact from the relation between language and body."[43] Coming out rewrites the relationship between language and the body, but whether this rewriting is tragic or comic is not inherent in the immediate performance of the speech act itself but rather in the speech act's perlocutionary effects, to use Austin's term referring to the performative consequences of language. *Love, Simon*'s inclusion of this scene *before* Simon is outed on a larger scale to his school serves to demonstrate the positive possibilities of coming out, an understanding of self-acceptance that is clearly missing from *The Children's Hour* by its location of coming out only after outing and Martha's ultimate demise.

The scene in which Simon is outed by someone else serves as an interesting twenty-first century navigation of outing. Simon is outed by a classmate, Martin, who posts screenshots online of Simon's emails with another closeted gay teen at his school. Simon's emails are notably absent of identifying details: both he and the other teen only identified themselves by the pseudonyms Jacques and Blue. Although both closeted teens come out to each other in those emails, additional action is required by Martin in order to transfer the individual moment of coming out into a broader outing. He does this with the addition of text (that is visible to the spectator) that is narrated by Martin in another instance of asynchronous dialogue, where he writes/says, "Simon Spier has a secret male pen pal. Because he's gay. Interested parties may contact him directly to discuss arrangements for butt sex. Ladies need not apply." Unlike the concealed outing of *The Children's Hour*, Simon's outing is directly communicated to the spectator both visually and audibly and Martin's patently homophobic statements are clearly framed as such, but the injurious effects of his words proceed in a remarkably similar, albeit more explicit, way. The characteristic "ding" of incoming text messages immediately begins as Simon reads Martin's words, signifying that his peers are aware of his outing and are now considering him to be gay. The camera repeatedly takes Simon's perspective via multiple eyeline matches, suturing the spectator to Simon's affective, overwhelmed reaction as message after message pops up, a veritable deluge of forced contact that culminates in a handheld camera capturing Simon crawling into bed, turning his back to the spectator as he cries. Although the

[43] Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 67.

text messages that can be seen by the spectator are overwhelmingly supportive, it's clear that Martin's words have irreparably altered Simon's subjective existence through an injurious restructuring of his social context.

The film further develops his changed situation via a series of scenes in which Simon comes out to his parents and receives a positive but definitely awkward reaction, stops speaking to his friends due to the actions he had previously taken to maintain his closet, and is subjected to a homophobic prank by two heterosexual classmates.[44] While the individual content of each of these scenes differs, their cumulative effect is to demonstrate that despite Simon's wishes, things *have* changed, and even if he doesn't face the overwhelming hostility experienced by Karen and Martha in *The Children's Hour* his sense of being deeply injured is evident. His coming out to his parents occurs on Christmas morning, causing familial strife in the moment so emblematic of white, middle-class, heterosexual American normativity that Sedgwick chose it as her metaphor to explain heteronormativity. Martin attempts to clumsily apologize to Simon by saying that he "didn't think it would be a big thing," to which Simon angrily responds, "I don't care if you didn't think my coming out was gonna be a big thing, Martin. Look, you don't get to decide that. I'm supposed to be the one that decides when and where and how and who knows and how I get to say it. That's supposed to be my thing!" Although Simon doesn't suffer as severe of social consequences as Martha and Karen in *The Children's Hour*, it is made obvious to the spectator that a seismic change has occurred.

The exchange between Simon and Martin highlights both the radical differences and deep similarities between outing in *The Children's Hour* and *Love, Simon*. Simon frames Martin's words as "doing" his coming out, implying that coming out was something he always intended to do rather than something that was completely forced upon him. The injurious and scandalous nature of Martin's speech is similar, however, to Mary's whispered words about her teachers in its context-destroying valences that are uncontrollable by the speaker. Although the two films thus detail different series of events after the moment of outing—Simon goes on to affirmatively come out to his classmates and publicly begin a relationship with his e-mail pen-pal—outing is

[44] The scene in which he fights with his friends is particularly notable for its almost forced nature. While there is certainly no objective standard of negative affect, his friends' grievances seem absurdly petty in comparison to the world-shattering event Simon has just undergone. It's therefore notable that this rejection is not tied to homophobia but could instead be read as a deliberate filmic choice to reinforce Simon's changed social reality, creating a situation in which he is isolated from his heterosexual friends but can easily recuperate their friendships at the film's conclusion.

operationally similar in both films even though the outings occurred in radically different temporal and narrative contexts. And although the difference in ending can be understood as *Love, Simon*'s product of a more gay-tolerant late 2010's American society, the difference can also be cinematically understood through the films' depictions of *coming out*. Simon and Martha both come out in response to their outings, but where Martha's coming out is the final nail in her coffin it is for Simon the production of subjective coherency. Although being outed causes Simon to search for articles on "how to dress like a gay guy" over Christmas break, he ultimately returns to school dressing and acting in the same manner as before, addressing his earlier anxiety around his loss of subjective identity after coming out. It's thus notable that Simon comes out to Abby before he is outed and is identified as queer from the very beginning of the film. While the injurious nature of the outing speech act still works upon him, his previous self-knowledge of queerness and ability to linguistically state that to others grants him a subjective core that survives the outing instead of, as in Martha's case, being *produced by it*. Martha can only figure her queerness in terms *of the injury done upon her*, while Simon's queerness existed before and after outing even if the outing speech act caused momentary subjective insecurity.

Coming out and outing speech acts can thus be understood as indelibly linked but also highly dependent on context to determine their ultimate resolution. Although outing creates an injurious moment that catches the queer individual in a subjective trap, the ultimate telos of coming out beyond a statement of queer identity is not set in stone. In other words, although outing will always produce a measure of subjective instability, coming out can be the speech act that functions either tragically or "comically." *The Children's Hour* does not end tragically simply because of Mary's injurious speech act; *Love, Simon*'s titular character experiences a similarly injurious situation and ends his film on a positively saccharine note: the other closeted teen reveals himself to be one of Simon's peers and the two end the film romantically paired. While the two films of course belong to different genres—the former being a theatrically-inspired social issue drama and the latter a sticky-sweet romantic comedy based on a young adult novel—it's also possible to attribute Martha's death to the embedded homophobia of 1960's Hollywood. Regardless of why Martha meets an untimely demise, her self-disgust and suicide demarcate just one possibility of resolving being outed, one that is thankfully reducing its prevalence in both film and our world. Coming out and outing are thus speech acts that are

strongly performative and operationally distinct, but also dependent on a subject's navigation of their social context in order for a final ending to be decided.

3: The Cinematography of the Closet: Coming Out in *Brokeback Mountain* and *God's Own Country*

> Vision not only provides us fundamental access to the seen and visible world, but it also provides us fundamental access to ourselves
>
> —Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*

If performative qualities of language enable coming out (as I argued in chapter 2), then it follows that performance's non-verbal possibilities also offer opportunities for coming out. Clear examples of non-verbal coming out exist: Deborah Chirrey describes the possibility of coming out by means of "well-known signs and symbols" such as pink triangle badges or rainbow imagery, but such obvious imagery is no different in function from the coming out speech act even if it is perhaps less direct.[45] This chapter addresses non-verbal processes of coming out that don't rely on well-known signs but are instead accomplished through cinematic techniques that "do" coming out on behalf of the film's characters. This process of coming out as demonstrated in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *God's Own Country* (2017) allows for coming out that still makes queerness legible without requiring specific linguistic moves, expanding the possibilities of who can come out and how they can do it.

While the language-based system of coming out admittedly has much practical value, it does privilege the vocalized speech act as necessary for intelligible gay subjectivity. This establishes a barrier to legible queerness to those unwilling or unable to utter these unambiguous words. This exclusion takes on additional problematic valence when considering those subjects most likely to be unable to vocalize queerness; Michel Foucault writes that "silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse … than an element that functions alongside all the things said."[46] J. Jack Halberstam is even more specific as to the restrictions in place for many queers, writing that "for some queer subjects, time and space are limned by the

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[45] Deborah Chirrey, "'I hereby come out': What sort of speech act is coming out?," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, no. 1 (2003): 27.

[46] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 27.

risks they are willing to take."[47] Predicating intelligible queerness on the ability to produce a certain speech act risks excluding those potentially most in need of queer-positive discourse and furthers the myth of compulsory heterosexuality by assuming heterosexuality-unless-stated-otherwise. Non-verbal coming out allows for the closet to be navigated in a nuanced manner that doesn't require the linguistic figuration of identity (e.g. "I'm gay," "I like girls," etc.). Queerness can be made legible without verbally claiming an identity, offering an alternative to remaining totally closeted without forcing a speech act.

Such a possibility is crucial given that the protagonists of the films I analyze in this chapter do not use clear-cut words used to describe their queer acts, bodies, and relationships. Instead, the men at the center of these films—Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) in *Brokeback;* Johnny Saxby (Josh O'Connor) and Gheorghe Ionescu (Alec Secăreanu) in *God's Own Country*—maintain a complicated relationship to coming out utterances: they acknowledge those words' performative potential but refuse to deploy them with self-defining illocutionary force. Instead these men rely on non-verbal semiotics to either out themselves or remain in the closet. As they alternately out and closet themselves to each other, their semiotic moves are conveyed via filmic techniques such as long takes and close-ups that out or closet the characters to the spectator. As the narratives of the two films diverge from deceptively similar beginnings to radically different conclusions, it also becomes apparent that the cinematic representation of coming out and the closet has significant effects on the production of a legibly queer character and their narrative outcome.

Specifically, I argue that certain filmic techniques highlight the potentiality of semiotic coming out to produce intelligible queer subjectivity without privileging speech acts. While I only apply this analysis to two films here, it is arguable that similar relationships between coming out and film technique exist in other films due to the expressive nature of cinema, which I will address more fully below. I analyze these films for a number of reasons besides their theoretical value, including their thematic and narrative similarities: both films depict two rugged, seemingly normatively masculine men who meet while performing agrarian labor and begin a secret romance. These similarities enable a comparison of differences in coming out that is less dependent on the diegetic setting of the films. It's worth noting that the films were

[47] J. Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York & London: New York UP, 2005), 10.

produced in extremely different contexts, separated not just by over a decade but by a marked difference in production context. Although *Brokeback Mountain* was an independent film rather than a Hollywood studio production, its box office success and role as a landmark of mainstream acceptance of queer cinema stands in stark contrast to the low-key release of *God's Own Country*.[48] Despite these contextual differences, the depiction of queer existence in rural space offers a similar ground against which to examine how expressive qualities of each film "do" coming out.

In this regard, I am indebted to the film theories of Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker that endow film with subjectivity and embodiment, allowing for film to *do* coming out rather than simply *represent* it similar to perlocutionary speech acts that have force in their utterances. Sobchack identifies a viewing subjectivity in film, "one that manifests a competence of perceptive and expressive performance *equivalent* in structure and function to that same competence performed by filmmaker and spectator."[49] Sobchack is careful to acknowledge that film isn't a human subject, but emphasizes the active, expressive capabilities of cinema to engage with the spectator in a "dialogical and dialectical engagement of *two* viewing subjects who also exist as visible objects."[50] Following Sobchack, Barker extends this theory to the materiality of the film, emphasizing that filmic subjectivity is *not* simply an extension of the filmmaker's subject position:

> The film's body is the mechanism through which its intentional projects in the world take shape. That enabling body is generally transparent: we see the perception and expression that it makes possible, but not the body itself. The film's subjectivity can be, and often is, foregrounded by particular films or filmmakers, but the fact of a film's subjectivity does not depend upon the films being self-consciously aware of it or remarking upon it.[51]

[48] Although *Brokeback* infamously lost Best Picture at the Oscars in 2005, it still won three trophies (Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Original Score) from eight nominations, as well as taking top awards at the Golden Globes, Director's Guild of America Awards, Producers Guild of America Awards, Writers Guild of America Awards, and the Venice Film Festival among others. In contrast, *God's Own Country* lost both BAFTA's for which it was nominated, failed to win top awards at either Berlin or Sundance, and took in a modest box office.
[49] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 22. Emphasis original.
[50] Sobchack, 23. Emphasis original.
[51] Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 10.

Barker's notion of embodied cinema emphasizes the relationship between the bodies of the filmic characters and the "body" of film, a metaphor for the cinematic apparatus, identifying a dual performance of actor and film: "The physical performance of the scene is taken up not just by the human figures but by the film itself, which performs its 'act' by means of structure, composition, and editing."[52] The relationship between character, film, and spectator can thus be understood as a dialogic relationship between bodies where performances such as coming out are *done* rather than represented, with the film's subjective body taking up the performative work. Sobchack writes compellingly on the expressive possibilities offered by this understanding of cinema:

> The cinema thus transposes what would otherwise be the invisible, individual, and intrasubjective privacy of direct experience as it is embodied into the visible, public, and intersubjective sociality of a language of direct embodied experience—a language that not only refers to direct experience but also *uses direct experience as its mode of reference*. A film simultaneously has sense and makes sense both for us and before us. Perceptive, it has the capacity for experience and expressive, it has the ability to signify.[53]

If cinema refers to and expresses through direct experience, coming out can occur through cinematic processes that are materially related to coming out performances that are not mediated by cinema (i.e. in the lived world). The occasion of a filmic character coming out to another character is thus not all that different from that character coming out to the spectator via the film's expressive and performative body. What *Brokeback Mountain* and *God's Own Country* do is not just *represent* coming out or the closet, but *performatively express* those discursive structures throughout the film's visual body. The implications of this epistemological shift towards a performative understanding of queer cinematic characters and coming out are exciting for a number of reasons. First, tracing the visual tools used by cinema to perform coming out develops the possibility of coming out via filmic semiotics, displacing the spoken utterance as the privileged mechanism. Second, understanding queer characters as sometimes coming out through filmic technique offers new possibilities for making queerness legible in cinema that aren't trapped in the problematic practices inherent to representation and language. Finally,

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[52] Barker, 70.
[53] Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, 11. Emphasis mine.

arguing for the production of queer identity without a spoken, self-defining invocation of "gayness" articulates possibilities for intelligible queerness without adhering to strict identitarian categories, offering new opportunities for queer self-identification.

"I ain't queer:" Performing the Closet in *Brokeback Mountain*

> In the vicinity of the closet, even what *counts* as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis.
> —Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*

Brokeback Mountain takes up the closet early in the film when Jack and Ennis first meet in Signal, Wyoming. After a short sequence showing Ennis arriving in the early morning and waiting outside the office of Joe Aguirre, his prospective employer, Jack pulls up in a backfiring pickup truck. Ennis's face isn't shot in close up until he's shown glancing up at the arriving truck, his face still shadowed by the brim of his cowboy hat, hidden from Jack and the spectator alike. Jack exits his truck, his face covered until he walks towards the camera—which is positioned somewhere between Jack and Ennis—and raises his head slightly, exposing more of his face to both Ennis and the spectator. The camera cuts to Ennis lowering his head, fully concealing his face beneath his hat, and then cuts to a close up of Jack as he registers Ennis's reaction, lowers his own head, and turns away. The camera returns to Ennis, who briefly looks up at Jack, who is now presumably facing away. Their eyes never meet.

The film never establishes whether Jack or Ennis are aware of their queer desires before they meet, but this early sequence can be read through the lens of the closet regardless. Ennis's refusal to speak or even show his face to Jack demonstrates a semiotic closing off reminiscent of the closet; one can't be read as queer if one can't be read at all. Jack responds in turn after his advance is rebuffed, turning his back to Ennis. However, Ennis's glance as Jack's back is turned and Jack's subsequent observation of Ennis in the side mirror of his truck offers the possibility of early queer exchange, a mutual probing of the other's closet that can only be done without the other's knowledge. The closet between Jack and Ennis is signified through this optic register—one man looking at the other without his knowledge—for much of the early action of the film. This creates a sort of cinematic closet where although Jack and Ennis's bodily performance hint

at concealed queerness, the camerawork and narrative deliberately refuse to depict explicit queerness.

This cinematic closet also excludes the spectator in these scenes, declining to depict explicit queer content on the screen and instead locating queerness in these unacknowledged looks. This closet is unstable and predicated on the individual history and knowledge of a specific spectator. Sobchack writes that this is an attribute of all film spectatorship: "to see a film, we must match our immediate and living view of the visible with a reflexive and reflective knowledge of our subjective acts of vision."[54] While any form of film spectatorship requires the spectator to understand the action on the screen through their subjective experience, this experience is historically tied to the queer spectator through what Vito Russo calls a "gay sensibility:"

> A gay sensibility can be many things; it can be present even when there is no sign of homosexuality, open or covert, before or behind the camera. Gay sensibility is largely a product of oppression, of the necessity to hide so well for so long. It is a ghetto sensibility, born of the need to develop and use a second sight that will translate silently what the world sees and what the actuality may be. It was gay sensibility that, for example, often enabled some lesbians and gay men to see at very early ages, even before they knew the words for what they were, something on the screen that they knew related to their lives in some way, without being able to put a finger on it…it as the sense of longing that existed in such scenes, the unspoken, forbidden feelings that were always present, always denied.[55]

Russo writes specifically on the traces of queerness visible in Hollywood film produced under the homophobic twentieth-century Hays Code, not the twenty-first century conditions that produced *Brokeback Mountain*, but his words are deeply applicable to the 1963 setting of the film's opening. Denied an intelligible, acceptable discourse through which to understand their desires, Jack and Ennis instead convey their desire in glances and peeks through a metaphorical cracked closet door, a motif explored throughout the film. This depiction of queerness might not be legible to every spectator; exchanged glances might not read as queer to a spectator whose own experiences of vision have not included such moments. However, a new form of the closet

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[54] Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 54.
[55] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 92.

soon takes precedence: the titular Brokeback Mountain itself as articulated via the frequent wide landscape shots that linger on the screen, expanding the cinematic closet to include both men as well as the spectator.

From the first shot of the film, *Brokeback Mountain* features a number of long landscape shots that emphasize the grandeur and inaccessibility of the mountain while keeping the spectator at an impersonal distance. These shots frequently, but not exclusively, feature the mountain—a fictional name that is visually a composite of two mountains in Alberta, Canada—and mostly appear in the first act of the film while Jack and Ennis tend sheep on Brokeback. Film scholar Barbara Mennel attributes the prevalence of long landscape shots to the cowboy-western genre, writing that the exchange "creates a dialectic relationship between the excessive vast exteriority and inaccessible masculine interiority, endowing the landscape to communicate what characters can neither allow themselves to feel, nor are able to express."[56] I agree with Mennel that there is a relationship between the long landscape shots and the feelings of Jack and Ennis, but I would complicate that relationship beyond an interior/exterior binary. Instead I argue that the landscape shots construct the mountain as a larger closet encompassing both Jack and Ennis, providing a space for their queer desires to break from the individual, embodied closets they initially presented to each other. This closet doesn't replace the embodied closet which both men continue to present to other characters, but instead offers a geographic and cinematic space for queerness to finally break from a near-invisible sensibility into unmistakable eroticism. The mountain's geographic closet is real to Jack and Ennis in their material navigation of the rough terrain that prevents markers of heterosexual society, such as Ennis's girlfriend Alma, from being physically present. This geographic isolation is then signified in equivalent terms to the spectator through landscape shots emphasizing the height and vastness of the mountain. This cinematic navigation of the closet enables coming out insofar as Jack and Ennis are able to do so, rejecting linguistic signifiers in favor of visual expression through the film's body.

The landscape images in *Brokeback*—sweeping plains, steep mountain faces and deep valleys—are of course not typically associated with the closet or with queerness. Halberstam notes that in association with queerness, "nonurban areas were simply 'out there,' strange and

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[56] Barbara Mennel, *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires and Gay Cowboys* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 102.

distant horizons populated by hostile populations."[57] Rural areas are figured in the minds of queers and non-queers alike as unfriendly and potentially lethal spaces where small populations and a lack of explicitly queer places such as gay bars leave queers isolated from each other and surrounded only by disproving heterosexuals.[58] Halberstam subverts this normative assumption, noting that possibilities exist for rural environments to "nurture elaborate sexual cultures even while sustaining surface social and political conformity."[59] Halberstam thus argues that queer space—defined as "place-making practices … in which queer people engage … the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics"—can and does exist in the rural.[60] This is the case for Jack and Ennis, who after some time on the mountain spent secretly looking at each other finally act on their desires in a scene that visually creates rural queer space: a closet big enough for two.

Jack and Ennis first act on their desires in a scene that visually situates them inside a rural closet. After a night of drinking, the two men sit by a camp fire. Ennis proclaims that he's too drunk to depart for the night to tend sheep and will instead sleep beside the fire but not inside of Jack's tent despite Jack telling him he'll "freeze [his] ass off" once the fire goes out. This exchange is held over the course of a single long take visually dominated by two factors: the minimal lighting indicating the darkness of night that tints the whole screen except for the small flame of the camp fire, and the wall of mountains that fills almost the entire background of the image. As darkness fills the space surrounding the men, concealing them from any eyes that might be watching, the mountains in the background promise a more secure closet door against the rest of the world, offering them the chance to dispense with their individual closets. The film visually signals that although Jack and Ennis are outside, they are protected against optical observation and thus have created their own queer space on Brokeback Mountain, space that the film transfers to the spectator via visual representation.

The use of minimal lighting continues inside the tent, where Ennis eventually moves after Jack insists he leave the dying fire. The film cuts to an exterior shot of the moon, reemphasizing the night sky, before returning to the tent where Jack initiates a sexual encounter between the

[57] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 22.
[58] Although this attitude is irreducible to a single event, the high-profile, exceedingly brutal murders of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming (1998) and Brandon Teena near Falls City, Nebraska (1993) are frequently cited as contributing factors to queer fear of rural spaces, at least in recent years.
[59] Halberstam, 35.
[60] Halberstam, 6.

two. The sex occurs cloaked in darkness, the all but the broadest contours of their body movements fading into the night or else cut off by camera framing as medium and close-up shots signify desire and closeness. The final shot in the sequence is of the outside of the tent, barely moving, thus fully concealing the queer activity inside. Jack and Ennis come out to each other in this sequence without language; in fact, in a subsequent scene, Ennis emphatically states, "I ain't queer," and Jack replies, "me neither." This conversation, conducted against the backdrop of the mountains, linguistically repudiates their earlier actions. But their coming out is irreversible: the two men again have sex that night, this time while well-lit and accompanied by a tender soundtrack, techniques that mimic a (typically heterosexual) Hollywood love scene and thus work against the closet. Their linguistic statements *contradict* rather than solidify their coming out, which appears to occur in the moment immediately after Jack initiates their first sexual encounter: the two men briefly tussle, Jack gripping Ennis's face as Ennis holds his shoulders, before Jack begins to undo his belt. Once secure in the triple closet of the mountains, the nighttime, and the tent, Jack and Ennis open the closet door between them and begin a decidedly queer relationship.

Their relationship is queer despite their words saying it isn't. I say this not to argue that an individual's spoken declaration of their sexuality should be ignored in favor of attempting to "read" their actions. Instead, I am arguing that in their particular filmic and temporal context, Jack and Ennis are barred from participating in the linguistic exchange that Butler, Chirrey, and Liang take to precipitate coming out. Jack and Ennis's sex performs the coming out they cannot speak, and if what is spoken seems to reject queerness, it's worth remembering that, in Butler's words, "the enumeration of prohibited practices not only brings such practices into a public, discursive domain, but it thereby produces them as potentially erotic enterprises…even if in a negative mode."[61] Jack and Ennis's supposed rejection of queerness is in fact an acknowledgment of both queerness's erotic potential and their proximity to it, even if they must linguistically reject it in order to maintain their closet. The film allows for this by selectively navigating the closet between the men and heterosexual society, allowing their closet to shift in response to diegetic context, which is also how the closet functions for the queer subject in the lived world: Sedgwick writes that the closet is "a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence…that accrues particularity by fits in starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds

[61] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 110.

and constitutes it."[62] The discourse of anti-gay 1960's Wyoming might force silence, but the mountain—material for the men and filmic for the spectator—changes the terms of their situation, allowing for a certain type of queerness to develop. The mountain signifies a closet that conceals Jack and Ennis from the rest of their world, but it also becomes a symbol of their desire, a queer space that is dietetically accessible to them and *only* them.[63]

Brokeback's queer space is accessible to another body, though: that of the spectator. Although the spectator hears the two men linguistically disavow queerness, the spectator's earlier suturing into the scene of queer lovemaking makes the scene of coming out permanent. Kaja Silverman writes that the concept of suture "attempts to account for the means by which subjects emerge within discourse," referring to the development of the spectator's identification with the cinematic subject.[64] Silverman notes that while the function of suture in classical cinema is to obscure the film's fictional nature via structures such as shot/reverse-shot and 180° rule, other cinematic mechanisms and especially the lure of narrative work to situate the spectator in relation to the film:

> Camera movement, movement within the frame, off-screen sound, and framing can all function in a similar indexical fashion to a fictional gaze, directing our attention and our desire beyond the limits of one shot to the next. Narrative, however, represents a much more indispensable part of the system of suture. It transforms cinematic space into dramatic place, thereby providing the viewer not just with a vantage but a subject position.[65]

Silverman also writes that the spectator "is encouraged to establish a relationship not with those apparatuses themselves, but with their fictional representation," a process which allows for the ideological interpellation of the spectator into the film's discourse.[66] In the case of *Brokeback Mountain*, the role of suture is to bring the spectator into the closet alongside Jack and Ennis. Although the spectator hears that they ain't queer, the film sutures the spectator into the queer space inside the closet which is also visually articulated. The spectator's subject position is on

[62] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 3.
[63] Their boss, Aguirre, does scale the mountain and observes Jack and Ennis wrestling while shirtless in an extremely long, voyeuristic shot. He clearly understands the scene he witnesses to have a queer valence and refuses to employ Jack the following summer but doesn't further impede the men from returning to the mountain on their own or interfere in their purportedly heterosexual relationships with their wives.
[64] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 199-200.
[65] Silverman, 214.
[66] Silverman, 216.

the mountain, inside the tent, firmly ensconced in the closet that the film otherwise builds between the two men and the rest of their diegetic world. The film's navigation of coming out thus allows for Jack and Ennis's queerness to be made legible for the spectator while also providing the necessary concealment their relationship requires in the 1960's rural setting. Their queerness can thus develop on its own terms for a time, legible to each other and the spectator despite the lack of a coming out speech act.

Of course, this situation does not last. The men come off their queer space on the mountain, leading into the second act of the film where they attempt to wrestle with the consequences of their desire. As Halberstam notes, queer space is often determined by the risks queer subjects are willing to take, and Jack and Ennis ultimately decide that the risk of attempting to couple together within society is too great. Instead they allow the mountain to remain the sole site of their queerness; perhaps wisely so, as their one queer meeting off the mountain is observed by Ennis's wife and ultimately becomes a source of narrative strife. The sweeping landscape shots that populate the film's first act notably decrease after Jack and Ennis come off the mountain, while the number of medium shots and close-ups highlighting their discontent in heterosexual society only increase. Where tighter framing previously signified desire during their love-making scenes, it instead begins to signify their growing isolation from their friends and family who are unable to make sense of their actions.

While Jack and Ennis return to Brokeback several times throughout the rest of the film, the mountain's most significant appearance comes at the film's end after Jack's death. Alone in his home, Ennis opens a closet door to reveal the shirts he and Jack wore in 1963 hanging on the closet door alongside a postcard of Brokeback. The shirts were themselves retrieved from a closet in Jack's childhood bedroom, a final transfer of desire between their individual closets that hearkens back to the beginning of their relationship together while also further developing the closet as a major motif of the film. Ennis tearfully touches the shirts, muttering, "Jack, I swear," before closing the door and walking away, leaving the camera to linger on the space vacated by the closed door: a window looking out onto an open field that, despite offering a moment of hopeful freedom, fades to black.

The closet that structured Ennis and Jack's relationship is doubly invoked in both the literal closet that Ennis opens and shuts as well as the image of Brokeback, the site of the closet that nurtured their relationship but from which they couldn't break free. Formerly depicted in

sweeping panoramas, Brokeback is reduced to a small, flat image that is contained both by a literal closet and the figurative closet formed by Ennis's presumably continued concealment of his relationship with Jack. The film's earlier erotics are now bound up in this postcard that represents the only queer site Ennis ever knew, now completely shut away, out of view.

"We? No.": Semiotic Coming out in *God's Own Country*

> In the palpable tactility of the contact between film's skin and viewer's skin…film and viewer come together in a mutual exchange between two bodies who communicate their desire, not only for the other but for themselves, in the act of touching.
>
> —Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye*

While my analysis of *Brokeback Mountain* examined how the film built a double closet around Jack and Ennis, I turn to *God's Own Country* to more fully explore how cinema can do the performative work of coming out through a different style of visual expression emphasizing touch and tactility. While still at times articulating the existence of the closet, *God's Own Country* expresses coming out in a fundamentally different way than *Brokeback* that, I argue, more fully elucidates the possibilities for coming out via cinematic techniques that emphasize a queer relationship rather than the closet. The central men of *God's Own Country* exist in a fundamentally different cinematic relationship to each other and the landscape they inhabit, a divergence that produces a happier ending than the tragic conclusion of *Brokeback*'s cowboys.

Despite being set in the rolling hills of Yorkshire—perhaps the closest England has to Wyoming—*God's Own Country* starts with a drastically different montage. Rather than open with sweeping landscapes and long shots, the film begins with a long shot of a farmhouse at night, the background obscured by darkness and fog. The camera moves inside the house with a medium shot of Johnny, one of the two leading men, vomiting after a night of heavy drinking. The camera mostly stays close on Johnny even as he moves outside: a brief wide shot of the fields serves as an establishing shot rather than as repeated motif as we saw in *Brokeback*. If there is a visual motif in the film's opening it is tight shots, not just of Johnny's face but also extreme close-ups of a tuft of wool caught in a barbed wire fence or a leaky faucet. Rather than

emphasize the vast pastoral, the film's aesthetic is of the gritty materiality of rural life, evoking what Laura Marks terms haptic imagery: "an image of such detail … that it evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close."[67] Marks argues that haptic visuality—the spectator's act of viewing haptic images—encourages "a bodily relationship between the viewer and image" rather than identification with a figure.[68] However, the preponderance of close-up shots of *both* Johnny and his surroundings creates a relationship where Johnny is deeply instantiated in the material of the farm, a visual relation that aligns with the film's narrative emphasis on Johnny's deep ties to the farm. The spectator is also brought into this relationship, the haptic imaging of the landscape suturing the spectator into the film at the level of the body rather than the birds-eye-view, decidedly cinematic scale. The landscape is not vast and impregnable as in *Brokeback*, but close and exposed to both Johnny and the spectator, suturing the spectator into Johnny's subjective understanding of the farm.

Johnny comes out to the spectator early in the film when he hooks up with another man at a cattle auction. The sequence opens with an exchange of looks not dissimilar to Jack and Ennis's meeting in *Brokeback,* except that Johnny's look is both purposeful and returned rather than deferred. The sex itself is shot with the same tight framing as the film's beginning, this time of moving buttocks, clenched fists, and contorted faces. The shots usually contain a mix of both men's bodies rather than isolating one or the other, creating an erotic aesthetic similar to Barker's description of eroticism as "partially defined by the mutual exposure (but not possession) of two bodies to one another."[69] Although the man Johnny is having sex with doesn't figure prominently in the narrative, his encounter with Johnny is radically different from *Brokeback Mountain*'s reserved closet. The scene outs Johnny to the spectator but it also demonstrates that Johnny has a different relationship to the closet than *Brokeback*'s men; even if he is not out to his family, he has some conception of social outness that enables him to have sex with other men.[70] Notably, this outness doesn't extend to romance; when Johnny's hookup asks if they can get a pint together, Johnny responds, "We? No," a linguistic refusal of romantic queerness similar to Ennis's, "I'm no queer." Both Ennis and Johnny decline to frame their

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[67] Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 163.
[68] Marks, 164.
[69] Barker, 40.
[70] It is never made clear whether Johnny is out to his father and grandmother, the family members he lives with. Johnny's sexuality is never mentioned, even obliquely, by either character.

desires in the form of an identity, only contextualizing their desires via the *negation* of a queer identity. Johnny, however, seems very comfortable having queer sex as long as there's no kissing, no talking, and he's not being penetrated. Johnny is comfortable with queer pleasures despite linguistically refusing queer identity from his first queer moments on the screen, while Ennis's navigation of the closet is more complex.

This eventually changes with the arrival of Gheorghe, a Romanian farm worker who comes to work on Johnny's farm for what's supposed to be a short period while Johnny's father recovers from a stroke. Johnny and Gheorghe initially form a hostile relationship driven by Johnny's frequent use of ethnic slurs. This hostility is punctuated by the same concealed looks as *Brokeback*, such as when Gheorghe strips naked and bathes in the background of a shot while Johnny glances over his shoulder in the foreground. These looks sustain a muted eroticism that first explodes when the two physically tussle over Johnny's racist taunting while spending several days camping near the sheep. Gheorghe forces Johnny to the ground, lying on top of him and holding their faces together, the camera holding on their closeness for several seconds. While the reason for their closeness is far from erotic, violence brings about a sort of non-romantic closeness that appears again to initiate their first sexual encounter.

Gheorghe is urinating against a wall in the pre-dawn early morning when Johnny approaches, gripping his genitals under his sweatpants. The exact mechanics are offscreen, but Johnny appears to grab Gheorghe's hand and possibly move it to his own crotch. Gheorghe shoves Johnny to the ground and the two wrestle in the mud in a similar fashion as before. Their wrestling again leads to a moment of closeness that this time turns erotic as they begin ripping off each other's clothes. Unlike with *Brokeback*'s first sex scene this sex scene emphasizes the material and erotic: Johnny and Gheorghe's bodies are well lit and the mechanics of the sex they're having are perfectly clear, presumably even to a viewer unfamiliar with the specific bodily movements of sex between men. Tight framing again returns to highlight the twists of bodies, the mud smeared across their skin, and eventually smash cuts to an extreme close-up of Johnny's sleeping face, followed by a close-up of his hand and then a close-up of Gheorghe watching him sleep.

This sequence that outs Johnny and Gheorghe to each other by confirming their mutual attraction is filmicly and narratively very different from the first sex scene in *Brokeback*. Rather than locate sex between men only in a filmic closet, *God's Own Country* highlights the texture

and materiality of their eroticism, allowing for their queer desires to out them to the spectator without linguistic expression or obvious navigation of the closet. Barker writes that tactile eroticism between bodies can be "a perpetual process of concealing and revealing through and across their skins," a status of mutual permeability that doesn't just exist between the two men but also between the men and the spectator.[71] The film makes Johnny and Gheorghe's sex into the surface of the screen; while they are still spatially located, the film declines to emphasize space and instead focuses on their bodily movements and exchange. The camera slides across the surface of their bodies, accentuating the eroticism of their flesh which, instead of being hidden in a tent under the cover of darkness, occurs in daylight with the material of their earthy surroundings literally sticking to their skin. This not only offers a queer filmic space in which Johnny and Gheorghe can begin to build a relationship independent of the strictures of the closet, but also offers an erotic haptic image to the spectator that makes Johnny and Gheorghe's queerness immediately, intensely legible, sutured into the landscape through the repeated use of close-up and medium shots.

Johnny and Gheorghe follow their sex with a linguistic operation similar to but crucially different from Ennis and Jack's. Sharing a cigarette, Gheorghe looks at Johnny and scoffs. When Johnny demands to know why, Gheorghe replies, "freak," to which Johnny responds, "faggot." Gheorghe replies, "Fuck off, faggot," and the two laugh before the film cuts to the next sequence. While their use of "faggot" certainly carries a negative connotation, it's also different from the declaration, "I'm no queer." Neither Johnny or Gheorghe reject the label of faggot, although they don't confirm it in any way except through their queer sex. They also each label the other a faggot rather than each state it themselves; although utterance is deployed it is via exchange rather than self-reference. Furthermore, their linguistic exchange occurs *after* they've had sex, changing the context of their utterance; their linguistic exchange works to solidify an epistemological shift that has already taken place. This solidification also shifts the dynamic of their relationship: while their initial sexual encounter is quick, rough, and shot in stark natural light, their next sexual encounter after the freak/faggot exchange is emotionally tender: they kiss for the first time and the scene is shot with warm, soft light. Their camera treats their second sex scene much like the first—moving across their joined bodies and highlighting the meeting of flesh—except the second scene focuses much more on their faces as the two men kiss and

[71] Barker, *The Tactile Eye,* 63.

embrace. Johnny and Gheorghe already see each other as queer; their linguistic exchange then isn't truly a coming out, even if it does allow for more emotional erotic interaction. No new identity is constituted because the shift has already taken place absent of utterance or intelligible identity.

Although neither man claims any sexual identity, Gheorghe's identity as a Roma immigrant repeatedly figures in the film. Johnny asks him if he's "half-Paki" during their first meeting, and when Gheorghe replies that he's from Romania, Johnny declaratively states, "gypsy." Gheorghe quickly says "please don't call me that," but Johnny continues to refer to him as "gypsy" or "gypo" until Gheorghe tackles him to the ground, lying on top of Johnny and holding his face still as he stares him down and commands him to cease his racism. This is the first scene of physical encounter between the men: the camera holds them in a close-up two-shot as they stare at each other, their faces mere inches apart. It's notable that this violent physical fight is their first moment of touching and is soon followed by their first sexual encounter. Gheorghe's race—and Johnny's initial racism—is the catalyst which brings them physically together, which then later enables the development of their emotional bond. Gheorghe's race also figures in his ability to utilize the closet's protective qualities: as an immigrant in a predominantly white, English area, he is always already considered to be outside of the norm before his sexuality is even considered. Gheorghe is the target of harassment in a local pub, for example, even while Johnny is the one engaging in queer behavior. Johnny becomes extremely intoxicated and begins having sex with a young white man in the bathroom, but it is Gheorghe who is harassed by another patron and then, when he retaliates against the racist abuse, is called a "dirty little bastard" and ordered to leave by the owner. Although Johnny is engaging in public, queer sex, his whiteness allows him to move through rural, white England differently than Gheorghe. The racialized facets of Gheorghe's queerness point to the reality that, for queers of color, coming out is rarely a navigation of just one oppressive system. The film doesn't dwell on Gheorghe's race and the films ends without any significant dissection of the racism he faced, instead leaving the matter just as unspoken as his sexuality.

This non-verbal framework persists throughout the film: at no point do Johnny or Gheorghe claim any sexual identity other than calling each other freaks and faggots. Their exchange takes a personally signifying role for both men; when the fight between the two causes Gheorghe to go to another farm, Johnny follows him and approaches him in the barnyard. After

emotionally confessing his feelings for Gheorghe and begging him to return to his farm—notably using the phrase, "I want us to be together"—Gheorghe responds by calling Johnny a freak, to which Johnny happily replies faggot. While the words certainly retain their queer connotations, they hold secondary meaning for Johnny and Gheorghe, reminding them of their relationship together and of their shared denial of identity. Although they decline to declare themselves as queer their relationship is one between men that is not mediated by heterosexuality.[72] Rather, Johnny and Gheorghe end the film walking into the farmhouse together arm in arm. No explicit utterance is made of the specific terms of their emotional relationship—boyfriends, monogamy etc.—but they are clearly together, and together outside of any closet—psychological, geographic, or cinematic—that would seek to conceal that.

Johnny and Gheorghe's coming out is not verbal but it is nonetheless effective in developing a queer relationship that is intelligible to both each other and to the spectator. The film's performative work in making their queerness legible allows them to come out without exact linguistic figuration. Their desire is both visible and, through its visual suturing into the landscape, not explicitly closeted even if it is also not explicitly "out." In this way *God's Own Country* allows for queerness to be explicit without linguistic conformation or the structures of the closet, offering new and exciting possibilities for how cinematic coming out can occur and what it can signify.

[72] The universality of compulsory heterosexual makes it nigh impossible for any person or any relationship to exist without bearing some sort of relationship to heterosexuality. What I mean by my statement is that Johnny and Gheorghe's relationship is not explicitly filtered through any discourse of heterosexuality; for example, neither appears to have any interest in women or attempts to conceal their desires even if they aren't overly forthcoming.

Different Histories: The Past, Present and Future of Cinematic Coming Out

> Hollywood is yesterday, forever catching up tomorrow with what's happening today.
>
> —Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*

I have demonstrated throughout this thesis that cinematic coming out can occur linguistically through dialogue or visually through cinematography and editing. I have also addressed the results for different types of coming out, be it the injurious, destabilizing nature of outing or the provocative possibilities of non-verbal, non-identitarian legible queerness. The specifics of how coming out occurs creates a range of radically different narrative conclusions including happy pairing, desolate loneliness, and even death. These consequences are not necessarily the unavoidable telos of coming out but are rather a product of the intersection of the coming out process with other historical, social, and cultural situations. These intersections include both the diegetic contexts within queer films as well as the circumstances of the film's production. In this final section I will question the historical timeline of queer cinematic production before gesturing to a series of diegetic contexts of coming out that warrant further investigation: coming out at the intersections of race and culture, transgender coming out, and the use of coming out as a narrative trope.

In each chapter of this thesis I examined two films; in both cases the former film was released prior to the latter and was also, in my analysis, the film which was more repressive and lethal in its treatment of queer characters. This analytic structure implicitly posits a linear timeline from the restrained *The Children's Hour* to the legible-but-lethal queerness of *Brokeback Mountain* that culminates in the visibly queer happy endings of *God's Own Country* and *Love, Simon*. Such a timeline too easily aligns with the repressive hypothesis of sexuality thoroughly debunked by Michel Foucault and is also patently untrue when the full history of queer films is considered.[73] The flurry of legibly queer films produced in Weimar Germany is both a corrective to the notion that the past was always repressive and a sobering reminder that no social progress is permanently ensured. And while the homophobic Motion Picture

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[73] For Foucault's explanation and debunking of the repressive hypothesis, see Parts I & II of *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

Production Code did undoubtedly create an era of repression, it would be a mistake to say that such an era was able to completely bar queer traces from cinema, or that the end of the Code in the 1960s signaled a more inherently progressive moment. Nor do the New Queer Cinema films of the early 1990s track with a linear understanding of queer cinema's trajectory, given that the NQC was preceded by such undeniably queer films as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) and *Mala Noche* (Gus Van Sant, 1985) and followed by films that minimize queer legibility such as *Capote* (Bennett Miller, 2005) and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Bryan Singer, 2018). In other words, while the historical situation of a film's production does bring some bearing upon its queer legibility—or lack thereof—it's impossible to trace a temporally straight line in the direction of visibility. There are perhaps general trends but no steadfast rules in the history of queer cinema, which continues to maintain as tenuous and circumscribed a place in mainstream culture as queers themselves.

The films I analyzed in this thesis share a quality which undoubtedly aided in their cultural accession: they all center upon white, cisgender characters whose desires, while certainly queer, easily fit within the false logics of binary gender.[74] While this choice was not intentional, it does warrant mention that this narrow focus leaves untouched vast possibilities for further investigation of cinematic coming out. Jasbir Puar notes a tendency among white critics to gesture towards intersectionality without doing intersectional work in their analysis, resulting in "a problematic reinvestment in the humanist subject…the 'subject X.'"[75] In light of this problematic scholarly trend I want to note that this thesis is *not* intersectional in its aims, but is instead a deliberately narrow study of one particular aspect of queer life which, as I have described throughout, is intrinsically dependent on cultural and social contexts. The possibilities for expansion upon this thesis exist wherever cinematic coming out occurs, including those in which intersectional analysis would be vital for complete understanding. A reading of the film *Moonlight*, for example, would be impossible without considering how the film uniquely weaves the experience of coming out into the fabric of black American life in Miami, Florida. The film is split into a three-act structure tracing the life of a gay black man, Chiron (Alex Hibbert/Ashton

[74] While Simon's love interest in *Love, Simon* is black, his role in the film *as* Simon's love interest is minimal. Although he does appear throughout the movie in the role of Simon's friend, Simon is unaware of the actual identity of his email pen pal, instead imagining him in the likeness of whatever boy he then suspects. It's also notable that before he suspects any specific person of being his pen pal he imagines an anonymous white male body in the role; while *Love, Simon* thus eventually features an interracial gay romance, it is hardly *about* interracial gay romance.
[75] Jasbir Puar, "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess': Becoming Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012), 55.

Sanders/Trevante Rhodes), in his early childhood, teenage years, and young adulthood. Each act features a new scene of coming out that occurs differently: as a child he is forced to reckon with being called a faggot by his mother and he is later bullied by classmates for what they perceive as queerness even though Chiron hasn't actually come out. His "coming out" to his classmates is thus predicated on a failure to properly perform a specifically black masculinity, aligning with a history of black queer films described by Louise Wallenberg as depicting queerness and blackness "not in terms of an either/or, but in terms of an inclusive *and*."[76] *Moonlight* cannot be analyzed outside of considerations of race because Chiron's coming out is unequivocally racialized, signaling the additional pressures experienced by many queers of color.

Indeed, many queer films depict coming out as it intersects with other cultural prerogatives. Richard Dyer writes that "queer cultural production—like queers—can only exist in the society and culture in which it finds itself," and while he was referring to queer cultural production within mainstream heteronormative culture it is also true that a significant number of queer films address the specific moves of coming out in the context of a non-hegemonic culture.[77] Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), for example, takes up the situation of a young Taiwanese gay man, Wai-Tung (Winston Chao) living in New York City with a white boyfriend who marries a Chinese woman to appease his pressuring parents. Although the film opens with several scenes depicting the heteronormative expectations of Wai-Tung's parents and the broader Taiwanese diaspora, Wai-Tung eventually comes out to his mother while his father secretly informs his boyfriend that he's aware of their relationship. The resulting comedy of manners ends on an unusual but upbeat note: Wai-Tung's parents return to Taiwan, both aware and approving of their son's same-sex relationship, but unaware that the other is also in the know and each commanding Wai-Tung and his boyfriend to keep it a secret from the other. The film thus posits coming out as contingent on the needs of the family unit as a whole rather than as a necessary expression of individual identity. Coming out is differently depicted as carrying great risk in the Indian film *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1996), which depicts two women who struggle to find pleasure in a patriarchal family before becoming lovers. The discovery of their relationship necessitates the shattering of their extended family and one of the women is set on fire by her jealous husband. While neither *The Wedding Banquet* nor *Fire* represents the whole of

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[76] Louise Wallenberg, "New Black Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 129. Emphasis original.
[77] Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 9.

Taiwanese or Indian culture—which is, of course, impossible—both films offer depictions of coming out within specific cultural contexts which therefore alter the available possibilities and eventual resolutions.

Films addressing coming out as transgender also take up a different set of possibilities and practices than many queer films. J. Jack Halberstam writes that in many trans films such as *Boys Don't Cry*, "whenever the transgender character is seen to be transgendered, then he/she is both failing to pass and threatening to expose a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present, and future."[78] In the language of my thesis, then, cinematic trans coming out is always injurious in its destruction of temporal context for both the trans character and the spectator, who must then reorient their understanding of the film's past in order to contextualize the film's future. Numerous films released since *Boys Don't Cry*, however, have addressed trans coming out in a more nuanced manner with greater cinematic respect for the trans body. The 2017 film *Una Mujer Fantastica/A Fantastic Woman* (Sebastián Lelio) tells the story of Marina (Daniela Vega), a trans woman from Santiago, Chile whose boyfriend suddenly dies of a brain aneurysm. Marina—who is portrayed by a trans woman, unlike the lead character of *Boys Don't Cry*—is stripped before the camera in order to be photographed for a police investigation into her boyfriend's death, but her nakedness is not treated as a moment of cinematic rupture. A police officer's voyeuristic look at Marina's exposed genitals is noted by the camera, but no eyeline match follows; the camera flash of the doctor photographing her body transitions into a shot of Marina angrily leaving the police station, now fully clothed. The camera's refusal to objectify Marina's body despite the explicit objectification of her by the State positions the spectator outside of the voyeuristic position; the camera that captures the film is differentiated from the objectifying and intrusive camera of the State. While the rupture noted by Halberstam does still certainly occur in other contemporary trans films, *Una Mujer Fantastica* articulates a different version of trans coming out that rejects rupture in favor of identification.

Finally, there are films with varying degrees of legible queerness that use the trope of coming out to stand in for other secrets which much be concealed. The period drama *Frantz* (François Ozon, 2016) uses queerness metaphorically in relating the story of a French soldier who travels to Germany in the aftermath of World War I to lay flowers at the grave of a

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[78] J. Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 77.

Germany soldier he killed during the war. He becomes accidentally involved with the grieving family of the solider and invents a backstory of time spent studying together in Paris before the war. The spectator spends much of the film unaware that the Frenchman is lying about his history with the German soldier, including an erotically charged scene where the Frenchman corrects the German's violin-playing posture: the camera holds both in a two-shot, slowly zooming in as the touch of their hands and exchange of looks is foregrounded. The scene is ultimately a fabrication of the Frenchman's guilt, the queer unspeakability of their imagined relationship metaphorically standing in for his inability to speak the truth about the German's death. On the other hand, the film *Juste la fin du monde/It's Only the End of the World* (Xavier Dolan, 2016) is led by a legibly queer character who is out to his family, but now must confess that he is dying of a terminal illness. His family needles him about his queerness as well as his detachment from their rural lives throughout the film, repeatedly insinuating that because he is gay he has little interest in their lives or in the concept of family altogether. He ultimately leaves without informing his family of his impending death, his silence now standing in marked contrast to the coming out he implicitly did before leaving home as a teenager. It's not coming out that is centered in this film but rather the closet, an inability to speak about death compared to the homophobic aggravations of his family caused by being legibly queer. These films' use of coming out as a narrative trope points to a different type of "coming out cinema" than the films I discussed at length in this thesis, creating opportunities for analysis of how queerness as a theoretical concept has spread from its roots in gender and sexuality studies to encompass a diverse number of topics.

All of these possible directions are equally worthy topics of possible inquiry, but the subject of this thesis is coming out as it relates to cinematic representations of sexuality. I have endeavored to trace the process and results of cinematic coming out in order to further critical study of the subject but also to expand the category of possibilities intelligible to filmmakers. The political process of dismantling heteronormativity mandates that queerness be understood as something materially productive rather than simply a rejection of the status quo. Coming out produces a queer body, no matter what form that coming out or that body might take. By producing intelligible queer bodies, coming out provides a material queerness which might begin the work of challenging heteronormativity's grip not just on cinematic production, but on human life.

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