

Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality
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Coming Out, or, Inviting In?: Reframing Disclosure Paradigms

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I. Introduction

The last time that I presented an iteration of this talk, Ugandan activist David Kato's picture had yet to be published in an anti-gay newspaper—distinctly positioned under the words “hang them.” David Kato had yet to be on the receiving end of increased death threats...he had yet to be mercilessly bludgeoned by way of a hammer...he had yet to die in a vehicle while en route to a hospital. After Kato's death, the act of “coming out” (the public declaration of our sexed and having-sex selves) now becomes an obligatory act of insurgence. How, then, is it possible to offer a critique of the “coming out” rhetoric, today, in the post-Kato murder days? In, these, the days of rabid protest?

The last time that I presented this talk, it was February and not yet September 2010. Several “gay-identified” youth had yet to take their lives in the course of one month. Their names—Tyler Clementi, Justin Aaberg, Asher Brown, Billy Lucas, Cody J. Barker, Seth Walsh, Harrison Chase Brown, Raymond Chase, Felix Sacco and Caleb Nolt—and lives were not yet memorialized. Some argue that one's self-proclamation as a sexual minority is the beginning of inter- and intra-personal transformation in the lives of our youth. The argument goes: If more adult sexual minorities “come out” then it follows that youth who identify and/or experience themselves as the same will feel safe enough to live with pride rather than die in shame. Why, then, a push to dismantle the “coming out” paradigm? Why, now, when we daily mourn the physical, social, emotional and spiritual killings of our young?

The reality is: the last time that I presented this talk, times were different, indeed. And, yet, they were very much the same. Queer folk: young, old, men, women, gender-variant, out, in, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, questioning, intersexed, closeted, outed, black, brown, white, poor, rich, urban and suburban still faced the threat of ostracization based on particularized shamings and assailings because of presumed and/or actual sexual identities. It has been (and continues to be) difficult times to talk about representations and the politics of representation because both have everything to do with the ways that we inhabit our shared world: the ways that some of us experience access and excess because of our varied privileges and the ways that some experience restriction and lack because of interlocking oppressions...the ways in which we relate to others and the ways in which we are related to. And this has always been the case in terms of the ever-contested and shifting nature of representations. Indeed, an unnamed writer in the Introduction to a Special Issue of *Radical America* titled, “Becoming Spectacle: Lesbian & Gay Politics and Culture In the Nineties,” provided the following admonishment: “Representations (of lesbians, gay men and sexual ‘deviance’) is happening everywhere (blatantly, subtly, literally, or coded) both in mainstream culture and official politics and by queers themselves. Articles in this issue both interpret dominant representations (subversively), and ask queers to become aware of the

politics of their own self-representation.”¹ It is the latter portion of the statement, however, that my research centers on. I argue that an appeal to queer persons to interrogate our own self-representations, is a call to embrace a necessary and timely turn in movements against heteronormativity and heterosexism. More specifically, I contend that “coming out” is limited in the radical potentiality needed to short circuit heteronormed ideologies and heterosexist practices. But, why?

The process of “coming out of the closet”—when imagined as an act of political resistance—can, indeed, be seen as an emancipatory intervention. It is often considered the only means of *survival* for queer people. But, what would it mean for us—for queer people—to move from a mode of survival when our survival has always been connected to our ability to daily “come out” from a “closet” that some of us may, or may not, have ever inhabited? What does it mean for us to move from a state of quotidian protest to that of radical resistance when our sense of self and communal agency is ostensibly acknowledged and thought to be actuated only after we “come out”, only after we name and define ourselves over against heterosexuals, only after we speak out (even if we really want to keep some things “in”), only after we march in pride parades (even if we feel shame because some pride parades seem to absent other essences of our identities), or only after we live openly and always marked as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning person (even if the labels themselves seem to delimit the fluidity of and/or experiences of our sexed and having-sex selves)? I wonder, then, if it is really efficacious to speak of our processes of self-disclosure, our moments of self-identification as LGBTQ/queer people, and the practices through which we become self-aware by way of the “coming out” metaphor. Does “coming out of the closet” properly function as the most useful way to name one’s quest towards self and communal liberation and expression? Does the usage of the “coming out” and “the closet” metaphors facilitate or impede the liberatory potential of a radical counter hegemonic confrontation with heterosexism and heteronormativity? Should we consider nuanced and innovative rhetorical and/or paradigmatic interventions, which speak, more succinctly, to a queer politic? In my brief talk today, I wish to problematize the functionality of such rhetoric and argue for a turn to a new intervention, or what I am naming, the practice (and politic) of “inviting in.”

II. On “Coming Out” and the “Closet”

Do the “coming out” and “closet” paradigms influence our imaginations of ourselves as spectacle and/or as deviant bodies in need of acceptance? Are LGBTQ individuals symbolized as the presumed “other” in the “coming out”/“closet” paradigm whose senses of self and identity and behaviors are always defined in relation to the normative heterosexual? If so, might “coming out” be understood as a practice that is, itself, heteronormative? Coming out has been defined as “the process of recognizing, exploring, integrating, and disclosing an alternative sexual orientation.”² And, even though, the argument goes that “coming out” functions to facilitate one’s sense of self-awareness and acceptance, it is also a politicizing process that seeks to unsettle heterosexist understandings and practices. To be sure, sociologist Arlene Stein argues, “during the past three decades, one of the primary goals of the lesbian/gay liberation movement has been to encourage people to ‘come out’ and declare their sexual identifications proudly and publicly as a means of

¹ Introduction, *Radical America* titled, “Becoming Spectacle: Lesbian & Gay Politics and Culture In the Nineties,” p. 3

² Natalie Hill, Affirmative Practice and Alternative Sexual Orientations: Helping Clients Navigate the Coming Out Process, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 2009 V. 27:346-356 (347) citing Cohen and Savin-Williams

countering the shame and secrecy associated with homosexuality in our culture.”³ Historian George Chauncey, however, traces the phrase origin of “coming out” to pre-World War II when it carried a different connotation than the politicizing potential contained in its present usage; to be sure, Chauncey argues that it did not suggest that one was exiting “the closet” but suggested that one was presenting oneself “to the largest collective manifestation of prewar gay society.”⁴ Since its prewar usage, the phrase “coming out” has endured many permutations including it serving as a reference to one’s first sexual experience with another man (1950s) and a change in its meaning in the 1970s to reference one’s announcement of same-sex desire to one’s straight friends and family.⁵ Chauncey argues that the shift in thinking regarding the meaning of “coming out” is directly connected to the periodization during which LGBTQ people stopped coming *into* “homosexual society” and the “gay world” and began disclosing their same-sex desire to heterosexual people.⁶ It was during this period, specifically in the 1970s Stonewall Riot era, when “the closet” was conceptualized as a trope for heterosexist oppression. Indeed, the notion of “the closet” functioned as Chauncey posits, “the spatial metaphor people use to characterize gay life before the advent of gay liberation as well as their own lives before they ‘came out.’”⁷ Thus, “the closet” was conceptualized as the repressive space that censures and constrains LGBTQ people and is considered, then, an oppositional domain.

Opposition, then, is framed as a foundational tenet of the “coming out” paradigm. And, even while revolutionary practices of resistance are needed to open up space for LGBTQ freedom and expression, what of the seeming *injunction* (as opposed to choice) on LGBTQ people to name our identities as a means of disclosure and protest. Where is the space for agency, or one’s volition, desire and choice to name oneself as s/he deems appropriate? Moreover, what is the utility of “the closet”, which Lynne Joyrich—a scholar of modern culture and media argues, as a paradigm that mediates between the binaries of “in and out, public and private, enclosure and access”?⁸ How does “coming out” privilege the notion of “access” and ignore, as Joyrich implies, those facing “relative disempowerment and vulnerability”?⁹ What does Joyrich’s critique offer us regarding the ways in which we conceptualize and universalize the “coming out” process and the agential potential present, or not, within the “coming out” process for those without the privileges that allow for “access”?

“Coming out” and its many derivatives (i.e. (Inter)National Coming Out; coming out Campaigns; outings; etc.) disallows the attending to the subjectivity and context of the person being asked/forced to “come out.” The dominant aim of “coming out” seems too closely connected to the decimation of “the closet” (a Stonewall-esque political aim) and less on the building up of LGBTQ persons and particularly those LGBTQ persons, whom for many reasons like socio-cultural, neighborhood, religious, or familial contexts, may find the process of “coming out” to be more harmful than helpful. We must ask: is our politic ultimately aimed at self and community empowerment or is it solely focused on winning the fight against the straight opposition? As feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander notes when speaking about the complexities of the transnational feminist politics of resistance, “What we have devised as an oppositional politic has been necessary, but it will never sustain us, for while it may give us some temporary gains (which become more ephemeral the greater the threat, which is not a reason not to fight), it can never

³ Arlene Stein, *Shameless: Sexual Dissidence in American Culture*, New York University Press: New York. 2006 115

⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940*, Basic Books: New York 1994. P. 7

⁵ Chauncey 7

⁶ Chauncey 7

⁷ Chauncey 6

⁸ Lynne Joyrich, Closet Archives, *Camera Obscura* 63, Volume 21, Number 3, 2006 p. 137

⁹ Joyrich 228

ultimately feed that deep place within us: that space of the erotic, that space of the Soul, that space of the Divine.”¹⁰ Similarly, LGBTQ/queer-identified and non-identified people will need to ask: Does the process of “coming out” and will the dismantling of “the closet” ultimately summon, respond to, feed, fulfill, that “deep place within us” or does it deny us the opportunity to do so altogether? Is the highest aim of our daily disclosures the shifting of power dynamics: a movement of the marginalized to the center or a provoking of centralist ideology and practices? What of the focus on the self, that is, our selves-in-connection to community?

Moreover, the “coming out”/”closet” paradigm seems to always connote a process of self-acceptance and self-love that is dubiously symbiotic wherein we must always define ourselves over against a heteronormative and heterosexist representation and imaginary. To be sure, Marlon B. Ross in his essay entitled, “Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm,” posits that “coming out” should be understood as the “general progress of homosexual-identified people from a state of oppression to a state of openness, autonomy, and freedom.”¹¹ Ross goes on to critique the emphasis on the “coming out” paradigm because of its dependency on one’s move from “the closet” to a space/state of freedom. Ross, therefore, dismisses the “coming out”/”closet” paradigm, present in “(white) queer theory and history”, as implausible because it is beset with what he calls “claustrophilia” or “a fixation on the closet function as the grounding principle for sexual experience, knowledge, and politics” as if “the closet” and secrecy and the lack of one’s knowledge of one’s sexed self is a universal experienced for all.¹² The presumption, then, that dismantling “the closet” forms the beginning of one’s self-awareness runs the risk of acquiescing to the “heterosexist assumption that individuals are straight until and unless they disclose an alternative sexual orientation.”¹³

The solution to the problem of heterosexism has less to do with the various ways that we orient and name ourselves as LGBTQ/queer people, or not—the problem is societal heterosexism and the ways in which bodies are assailed through discursive and materials means because of heterosexist oppressions (and, yes, queer folk can deploy those oppressions as well). As such, our politics and practices should be organized around the need to interrogate heterosexist identity categories and the hierarchies of power that are created discursively (and manifested materially) when we acquiesce to them. The process of coming out, that is disclosure of our sexual identities as a counter hegemonic act of resistance or as a means to name our perceived “alternative” (read, non-normative) sexual identities, does not contravene heterosexism, but, rather, it reinforces it. Would the more radical personal/political posture be that which disrupts the project of heterosexism and heteronormativity altogether by refusing to acknowledge and accept the bifurcated formula of straight/gay, normativity/alterity? Might it be possible for us to do so by destroying the particular “closet” that encases such knowledges? How might we construct, live into a queer space imbued with the potentiality for self-empowerment, self-determination, and agency. A personal/political space that we are no longer forced to exit-to come out from-but can invite others into.

III. On “Inviting In”

My thinking on this subject is greatly influenced by the theoretical/therapeutic work of Sekneh Hammoud-Becket, an Australian scholar and therapist of Lebanese Muslim ancestry. In her

¹⁰ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005 282

¹¹ Marlon B. Ross, Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson Duke University Press 2007 161-189 (162).

¹² Ross 162

¹³ Hill, p. 348

article, “Azima ila Hayati—An invitation in to my life: Narrative Conversations about Sexual Identity,” Sekneh offers an alternative to the “coming out” paradigm, or what she and her brother named, “coming in.” In this regard, Sekneh notes,

*In my therapeutic work, I have arrived at the points of reflection: How do we give thought and voice to people who might experience being marginalised within the marginalised groups in society? What happens when certain practices do not speak to all members of the group? How can we, as counsellors, free ourselves from prescribed ideas about ‘identity acceptance’ and open ourselves to learn something new, something different? In light of the above ideas, and after many conversations with my brother, we coined the term ‘coming in’. The term refers to the conscious and selective invitation of people into one’s ‘club of life’. Although it might be a matter of semantics, I have found it an experience-near definition that has opened space for many queer Muslim people with whom I consult.*¹⁴

Like Sekneh, I understand this particular intervention, namely, the re-constituting of new modes, practices of identity naming and acceptance as both semantical and performative moves. The words “coming out” signify a distinct subject position. Historian Shannon Woodcock argues that “coming out” signifies subjects who “identify communally with their sexual practice preference” and also presupposes that these identifications are “permanent and unchangeable identifying factor(s).”¹⁵ And, it is through the process/performance of “coming out” through which LGBTQ identities are constructed. “Coming out” functions, then, as a ritual during which the subject’s sexual (Cornell) identity, and the repressive space (i.e. “the closet”) wherein the subject is presumably situated, are reified through a set of discursive pronouncements. It is a process that is heralded for its liberatory potential: one only need to publically declare, or rather, become through declaration, LGBTQ to undo sexual repressions and oppressions. To illuminate this point, I offer the following reflection, which I quote at length, offered by a client of Sekneh that she recorded in her paper:

Well, when I started to visit gay organisations, some would prescribe to me how I should ‘come out’ and then let my entire family deal with this. They would say, ‘To tell people is to say you’re proud of who you are’ or that I wouldn’t be able to be a fully happy person if I didn’t ‘come out’ in particular ways. They would say simply, ‘People need to deal with it and get over it’.

People need to deal with and get over the dynamism of human sexuality, yes. But, what about the subject, her agency, her well-being, her choice? The process of “coming out”—as in my own life allows a certain type of disclosure and self-awareness to take place; however, it does so by way of an approach that is more politically-centered than person-centered. In lieu of the “coming out”/”closet” paradigm, I posit that we should consider an approach that is focused on the person. Here, I turn to Natalie Hill, who offers a constructive recommendation regarding the elements necessary for a “strengths-based” process of disclosure that “focuses on health rather than pathology” that “privileges clients’ self-determination in the all the areas of their lives, and builds on each client’s existing strengths.”¹⁶ Further, I argue for an approach that is a “person-in-environment approach” which as Hill argues, “honors the complexity of each individual’s identity and social location.”¹⁷ If the “coming out”/”closet” paradigm bespeaks a process of disclosure where certain bodies, through performative utterance, are placed in a symbolic (and material) system organized

¹⁴ Sekneh Hammoud-Becket, “Azima ila Hayati—An invitation in to my life: Narrative Conversations about Sexual Identity,” *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1(2007), pp. 31-32.

¹⁵ Shannon Woodcock, “Globalization of LGBT Identities: Containment Masquerading as Salvation or Why Lesbians Have Less Fun,” assessed at <http://latrobe.academia.edu/ShannonWoodcock/Papers>

¹⁶ Hill, 351

¹⁷ Hill, 351

around the heteronormative binaries of straight/LGBT, regulated/deviant than it follows that much of our focus will be on pathos and not the well-being of the subject.

In light of this, Sekneh deploys “coming in” as a person-centered intervention. I turn again to the reflection offered by Sekneh’s client who, in the following, offers his thoughts on the discontinuities between “coming out” and “coming in”:

[Coming out] didn't seem quite so straightforward to me. Perhaps it was because I am really proud of who I am, and I feel like I am a fully happy person, that I was able to look at the other ways of living my life. I know that if I had a choice to be straight, I wouldn't choose it. Even if I don't tell certain members of my extended family about my sexuality, I don't view myself as in the closet, in a dark place that I must escape from. Far from it, this 'closet' is full of precious things, like things you could never afford to buy! It's my treasure chest. The way I see it, rather than me needing to move out of the closet, to make my sexuality public to everyone, including my parents, instead I get to choose who open the door to, and who to invite to 'come in' to my life. The different metaphor took away the pressure I had been feeling. I no longer feel a pressure to 'come out' to my entire family, and instead I have many precious people who I have invited to 'come in' to my life. I am hoping that other people in my situation don't feel the pressure of these 'games of truth' to make a public move that doesn't fit for them. I like the fact that I choose people to 'come in' to my life. Importantly, I choose people who I think are valuable to support me and share things that are important to me.

“Coming in” connotes the existence of the subject’s agential potential, the ability of the person to choose when and to whom s/he will disclose their sexual (or other essences of) identities to. And where, “coming out” ostensibly functions as a survival mechanism that must be enacted by LGBTQ people only and demands that the onus is on us as the sexual minority to disclose to others, a demand to out our “alternative” sexual identities over and against heterosexual identification and when, or, if we don’t, it is assumed that we complicitly live into a compulsory heterosexuality that refuses to challenge heterosexist and heteronormative structures...“coming in” functions as a means of hospitable sharing, a choice to disclose to those with whom we may feel safe disclosing to, a choice to disclose when we feel ready to do so, and an opportunity to subvert heteronormativity by refusing to *other* ourselves, that is, to self-disclose as a means of compliance with the unspoken demand placed on all non-straight identified individuals to name ourselves as sexual minorities out of fear of being named “straight”. In my estimation, is the act of *invitation*, as opposed to a focus on directionality (or rather, the movement of the subject from a presumed closet [coming out] and/or the movement of persons into the subject’s life-space [coming in]) that serves as the liberatory feature of this intervention. As such, I prefer the use of the term “inviting in” as a means to illumine the invitational praxis constituted in this particular intervention.

IV. Conclusion

I have argued that “coming out” and “the closet” are mutually inclusive phrases that cohere to form a paradigm imbued with some problematic connotations. And, I have attempted to show how “inviting in” might prompt new, radical, queer politics of representation and paradigms that are disconnected from the heteronormative notion of “the closet.” Where “coming out” is a process that is dependent upon one publicly exiting the “closet” as a radical performance of resistance that presumably seeks to counter heterosexism (even while fortifying it), “inviting in” is a process that centers on the person-in-community and her agential potential (namely, her existence outside of a need to define herself in response to an injunction to do so as per a need to dismantle and/or acquiesce to heterosupremacy). It is ritual that invites the subject to engage the domain of her own personhood. Where “coming out” is a process that is only achieved when one decides to formally and publically disclose his sexual identity (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning

identifier), “inviting in” is a process that encourages one to explore or refuse categorizations. It is a process that frustrates heteronormative hierarchies, binaries and oppositions. Where “coming out” seemingly encourages one to exist on one side of the secrecy/revelation, invisible/perceptible, reticence/articulation, and shame/pride binaries, the process of “inviting in” understands that context is a valuable factor that influences the ways we negotiate these potentialities daily. Lastly, where “coming out” calls/demands one to name her sexual identity—as if one presenting oneself to the public, the process of “inviting in” encourages an individual to make a choice to educate/share with another—to literally extend an invitation, or not, to another to sojourn in her life-space.

Some may argue that the act of modifying language is a mere game of semantical charades, but I contend that it is vital to unpack the terms that order our lives...to locate what is situated behind the varied signs that represent us. In order to change that which is foregrounded in our speech acts, we have to re-order, or rather, dis-order the domain of the symbolic. By refusing to pronounce symbols and paradigms, namely the metaphors “coming out” and “the closet”, that order and constrict the ways in which we self-represent, we begin the revolutionary process of moving from a mode of opposition, survival and “getting by” to a mode of radical disordering, being and “getting over.” By changing the words we use and creating new paradigms, we actually are engaging in a strategy of resistance that may hopefully transform all of us.