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Closeted Tiktok: Liminality, Internalized Stigma, and Heterotopia in the Rite of "Coming Out"

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CLOSETED TIKTOK: LIMINALITY, INTERALIZED STIGMA, AND HETEROTOPIA IN THE RITE

OF "COMING OUT"

By

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ABSTRACT

The global shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic brough the social media app, TikTok, to the

forefront of online communication and creativity. My own use of the app brought me to a series of videos

that focus on LGBTQ+ experiences, issues, rights, and relationships. I was especially intrigued by a series

of videos that discussed experiences with being "in the closet" and "coming out," meaning to obscure or

reveal one's sexual identity respectively. The focus of this ethnographic project is to understand how

creating and engaging with these kinds of videos on TikTok impacts the coming out and closeted experience

of men who love men with particular attention being paid to internalized sexual stigma. I argue that the

coming out journey can be understood as a rite of passage and to be stuck "in the closet" is to be stuck in the

liminal phase of that rite. I then argue that Closeted TikTok is a kind of heterotopia, created by the

performative utterances of its users, that alleviates the experiences of internalized stigma which

accompanies being stuck in this liminal stage. By simply speaking about their experiences, these accounts

create a space for closeted men to feel like matter in place rather than matter out of place, a sentiment that is

all too rare in their everyday lives.

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By Grant Chemidlin

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when the archer nearly knocks

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Oh, the balancing.
Oh, the horror

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for the world to see.

Your secret,
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the person whom you're meant to be,
unleashed,

without permission.

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, I traveled back home to California to visit some family. At the time, I was secretly coming to terms with my sexuality. I had convinced myself that I did not need to tell anyone else that I like men as much if not slightly more than women, an identity I found to be most in line with the concept of bisexuality. Those two weeks I spent in California are slightly more than a blur as I was packing in family time and re-living memory lane between two classes whose syllabi decided to cram these days to the brim with final content. Despite the chaos, there is one night that I remember well.

In the days leading up to my visit my best friend, Karl, and I were making plans to celebrate his 21st birthday. Our ideas were simple: Star Wars Battlefront II, pizza from a popular local franchise, and a drinking game involving taking a shot of rum whenever Hayden Christensen made Anakin look pathetic in *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones.* To the everyday college student, it sounds like a sorry excuse for a 21st birthday celebration. But we have always been the "stay in with friends" kind of people, and the pandemic made other options less than ideal.

The night proceeded as planned. Lots of drinking, lots of eating, and lots of cringe-worthy moments gifted to us by Hayden Christensen. Eventually the movie ended, the pizza disappeared, and the rest of his household went to bed. Karl and I were still on the couch, lazily sharing a bottle of Bacardi rum while playing Two Truths and a Lie. The premise of the game is that one person says two truths about themselves and one lie. The job of the other person is to determine which of the three statements is false. If they fail, they take a swig from the bottle of rum. The game had been progressing for over an hour. The ceiling light in the living room created a soft yellow glow around the space that, despite the open concept floor plan of the

home, gave me the feeling of being in a kind of protective bubble. Karl's living room has always had that effect at night. It seemed insular, hidden away despite being the heart of the house and a hub from which sounds could be carried via echoing acoustics. If someone wanted to, they could hear our conversations from down the hall or at the end of the kitchen. California is not my current home of Georgia; there are no animals, no cicadas, and hardly any crickets to hide the whispers of one's secrets in the night. Standing outside in the summer I swear you can hear a pin drop, whilst in Georgia one almost has to project to be heard. One side of the living room was simply a wall of imposing sliding glass doors and windows leaving the glow of the mansions and orchards that decorated the surrounding sun parched hills completely visible to us, and us completely visible to them. In every sense of the word, we were exposed. Yet the illusion the yellow bubble creates had facilitated the sharing of secrets and concerns throughout our adolescence and I was sinking back into the familiarity of it all while I reclined into the right angle of his gray sectional couch. This couch had seen me grow from an awkward 8th grader with a bowl cut and bad acne into a closeted academic in a large college sweatshirt, loosely fitting jeans, and a pathetic excuse for a stubbly face. This room was my second home. Karl's family, in many ways, was my second family. I felt relaxed and light. I have learned to be comfortable here. My mind, however, was at war.

"I should tell him. It'll be fine. I want to tell him"

"You don't need to tell him, its none of his business."

"But he could offer advice or somethi-"

"You don't need to tell him."

This debate played on and on in my head until it was my turn in the game. *Fuck it*, I thought.

I avoided eye contact and said my two truths and a lie, "I have visited 15 states, I have had more gay sex dreams than straight ones, and when I was little, I had a fear of candles." Despite not losing a round, I took a sip of the rum for distraction, but the burning sweetness it caused in my throat was starting to fade. I do not know if 8th grade me would be more shocked by my ability to drink hard liquor with ease, or the fact that I was trying to expose our biggest secret. I was hoping the sex dream statement would be enough of a catalyst for Karl to ask more questions and for me to confess. I did not have the guts to come right out and say it and if I were completely sober, this would be something I would never dare to try.

"The sex dream one." Karl guessed with a straight face while sitting relaxed on the left side of the sectional, his back flush to its arm.

"No, I've only been to 13 states." I say passing him the bottle for his 'punishment.' My stomach tightens. If there is a moment, this would be it. *Fuck*.

"Ah." Silence. A short silence. Not long or significant enough to be marked as awkward.

"Your turn." I say quickly. When he starts talking, I am relieved. This was a stupid idea. This moment will be forgotten from both of our memories and for him, it might have had no significance at all. We kept playing for a few more rounds, passing the bottle back and forth until he asked, "You've really had more gay sex dreams than straight ones?" It sounded so easy for him. It was like he was asking me what Star Wars movie was my favorite or what toppings I wanted on my pizza. Looking back, he possessed the same steadiness of voice an ethnographer strives for when asking sensitive or uncomfortable questions to key research consultants.

I avoided eye contact, "Ya… I'm pretty sure I'm bi." And there it was. I must skip over some details to protect Karl's sentiments but his reaction was better than I could have hoped for. Karl was not only supportive but opened up about his own previously unarticulated experiences.

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I was able to discuss my attraction to other men freely and even showed him the Instagram of my latest celebrity crush. I was so happy to finally have someone I could talk to about my sexual identity. I did not realize how much I needed it. For the first time, I did not feel like I was sitting on this big secret that seemed to dominate everything. I felt belonging and not in a specific sense but more like I was finally a part of this world, I was no longer matter out of place.

A year later I was contemplating potential topics for an honors thesis to be conducted during my last undergraduate semester. After exhausting the possibility of expanding one of my prior research projects, I plopped myself on my bed and mindlessly scrolled through the social media app TikTok. After a few seconds of scrolling, I came upon a video of a young man in a dark room. His seated silhouette was illuminated by blue lighting that glowed from the space where the wall met the ceiling. This space was then covered in cotton balls to give it the illusion of being soft, blue clouds. The wall itself was covered in unidentifiable photos, a large and unfathomable collage. The special effects gave the impression that he was in another dimension altogether, one protected and insulated despite appearing to be an everyday bedroom. This was his bubble. He began discussing his experience of being in the closet using his own voice— something I later discovered to be a rarity for this kind of content—and possessed such a poetic prose that I became entranced. He sounded like a love-sick teenager reading Shakespeare to a significant other. He was shy yet confident and spoke in the raspy mix of someone just coming into their skin. I skimmed his page, his other videos, and the comments people posted. There were so many men giving advice to other men about life in the closet, expanding on the themes of the videos, reflecting on their own experiences, and at times shamelessly flirting. It was then that I decided I wanted to research this kind of "closeted content" on TikTok to understand how interacting with or making these videos affects the closeted or coming out experience of men

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who love men with particular attention being paid to internalized sexual stigma. Through this ethnographic project, I came to realize that Closeted TikTok is a kind of heterotopia, created by the performative utterances of its users, that assists in alleviating the internalized stigma the liminal positionality of being "closeted" creates. In essence, by simply speaking about their experiences, these closeted accounts create a space for closeted men where they are not some sort of abnormality. This feeling of acknowledgment and visibility allows men to diminish their sentiments of being out of place in a world that has consistently told them they do not belong.

Coming Out as Rite of Passage and the Closet as Liminal

"Coming out" in LGBTQ+ circles is a term that describes revealing your non-heteronormative identity to another whether it be sexuality, gender expression and preference, or any concept of self that does not fit the man/woman gender binary or a heterosexual preference. To be "in the closet" is to acknowledge your non-heteronormative identity but to keep it a secret from others in your life. One of the TikTokers, who I call JD, describes the closet as "dark, confined… like something tight, like kind of like a noose." In order to understand the closet, one must understand the whole concept of coming out not as a single event but as a rite of passage that fits within the discursive regime of our society. Philosopher and theoretical titan, Michel Foucault commented on the history of human sexuality not as a gradual shift from a suppressed form into a more liberated modern form, but as a history of ways of speaking about human desire. A particular group's way of speaking about human desire, what Foucault terms the "discursive regime," creates certain possibilities and limitations regarding the expression of human desire. The very idea that sexuality is an inner and permanently static truth is an aspect of our own society's discursive regime that has not been present in all cultural systems throughout

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time and indeed creates certain possibilities such as the whole idea of coming out (Foucault 1976 in Noriega 2014, 8) (Noriega 2014, 8) (Coote 1983, 29). The very fact that the way we talk about human desire is culturally constructed also means that the categories with which we make sense of sexual preferences (i.e. gay, straight, bi, pan, etc.) are also constructed. As such, in a heteronormative society such as ours where all are assumed to be heterosexual unless one expresses otherwise, one must transcend from the category of "straight" to a non-heteronormative one. A rite of passage, or the ritual transitions of an individual or group from one status to another, has long been understood by social scientists through the works of anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and later Victor Turner as such a transcendence of categories (Alexander-Nathani 2021, 5). A rite of passage was conceptualized by Van Gennep as possessing three phases that move an individual from one state to another: the pre-liminal separation of an individual from society which involves a ritual "death," the liminal stage/phase where the cultural system is reproduced through the actual ritual act and an individual is in between their old and new status, and a post-liminal re-introduction into society with a new status (Van Gennep 1909, cited in Alexander-Nathani 2021, 5-6). Through depicting the themes present in closeted TikTok videos and comments, I argue that coming out is a process in which the individual experiences a pre-liminal death of the self when they realize their non-heteronormative identity, a liminal phase where they must come out to those in their social worlds, and a fantasized post-liminal stage where the non-heteronormative individual hopes their sexual identity no longer has an adverse effect in their life. The issue, however, lies in the experience of individuals who cannot come out of the closet due to homophobia in their social environment. These individuals are trapped in a world where revealing their sexual preference will result in heightened experiences of daily dangers that are perpetuated by the social force of

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heteronormativity, a phenomenon titled by social scientists as structural violence (Haenn 2020, 7). The dangers these men experience go beyond the denial of services or acts of exclusion as documented in other studies, these men face abandonment, hatred, and disgust. This extreme structural violence is acknowledged via the double consciousness- the ability for one to be stigma resistant yet still aware enough to manipulate their identity performance in order to resist stigma (Orne 2013, 234)- of these men and results in their liminal entrapment even after they have acknowledged their own non-heteronormativity. This entrapped liminal stage is where these men truly suffer and where Closeted TikTok possess the power to heal.

Bringing Together Liminality, Stigma, and Internalization

Stigma and its many forms have been a topic of social scientific inquiry for over a century although research regarding the internalization of stigma in the field of anthropology has been relatively new as seen in the work of Cassandra White, who takes an in-depth look at the impacts of stigma in the experience of Hansen's disease. However, I find that merging psychological and anthropological understandings regarding stigma and pollution to be particularly useful when bridging the conceptual gap between liminality and its internalized harms. Anthropological understandings of stigma tend to come from the works of sociologist Erving Goffman who defines the phenomena as negative associations with a "deeply discrediting" condition (Goffman 1963, cited in White 2011, 147). This idea of stigma fits in well with the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas and her analysis of ritual purity. Douglas postulates that certain people or things can become an embodiment of "dirt" or matter out of place in societies because they cross or blend together two cultural constructions. Because this embodiment of "dirt" is neither one thing or another it occupies a liminal or in-between position

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and is seen as dangerous or not belonging, resulting in its removal to the margins of society

(Douglas 1966, 45-46, 118-119). For instance, the American teenager is an embodiment of this

ritual dirt as they are not children or adults but are in a liminal phase of transition in the rite of

growing up. As such, they create intense stress for others as people struggle to conceptualize the

teen's roles and responsibilities. Are they adults? Sure, they can drive and work. Are they

children? Of course, they must adhere to their parents and guardians. Then what are they?

Children or adults? Do they have a defined position in society? No, as dirt they are shuffled

through school and home with minimal public places to call their own resulting in their

habitation of abandoned parks, parking lots, or peripheral wild areas such as creeks. These places

are literally on the margins of society. The teenager's position as "dirt" also carriers with it an

aspect of stigma. Being a teenager in the U.S. is seen as possessing an undesirable condition

because of their inability to be placed in a category. How many times does one hear, "I don't

understand teenagers!" or "Ugh! Teens!" followed by comments on how they act too immature

or believe they are older than they are. This very phenomenon has been documented by

anthropologist Paul Willis in his study with working class adolescents in the United Kingdom

who cross cultural symbols and categories of adulthood in order to delegitimize the authority of

their teachers and create meaning for themselves in a social world where they know they inhabit

the bottom of the social strata (Willis 1977, 3, 11-12, 19-20). Their embodiment of dirt by

crossing symbols thus brings them intense stigma where teachers consider them as part of the

discrediting world of "those who are good with their hands." This stigmatized status resulted in

lowered expectations and services for these youths and the eventual reproduction of their

working class and thus marginal status (Willis 1977, 70, 146). But what if one occupies a secret

liminal position? If no one knows one is in a liminal positionality, can they still experience stigma?

The crossing between two defined categories by someone who embodies "dirt" is not just stressful for those who witness these liminal individuals, but also by those experiencing liminality themselves even if their liminal position is a secret one. Once again, Mary Douglas provides a fascinating view into this phenomenon in her concept of "autonomous pollution" (1966, 137). Douglas claims that individuals are constantly trying to put themselves in line with dominant values and norms communicated via rituals such as rites of passage. But when one has internal feelings that contradict those public messages, they experience intense anxiety and as such view themselves as matter out of place. As a result of this feeling of unbelonging the individual may commit two kinds of rituals: one that does not seek responsibility for the cause of their feelings or one that confesses their feelings and status as "dirt" (Douglas 1966, 169). What Douglas describes can be applied to the closeted experience of men for the past 70 years. Guillermo Noriega, in his study of homosocial relations in rural northern Mexico, argues that the very ideas of masculinity and sexuality are reproduced in gendered rituals that men undergo together. Such rituals are extremely commonplace and reserved only for boys/young men such as going down to the river with other boys to learn about sex or going on work trips to neighboring towns. Simply performing *andanzas* (hanging out or partying) with other men solidifies what it means to be a man including the expectations of heterosexual preferences (Noriega 2014, 42-43). In essence, these rituals reproduce the discursive regime in everyday ways and it is through these rituals that non-heterosexual men begin to internalize the idea that they are "polluted" or "out of place." In his analysis of autobiographic narratives of the childhoods of gay men from the 1950s to the 1990s, Bertram Cohler discusses that many gay men became aware of their same sex

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desire at a very young age due to these social rituals that were intendent to produce heteronormative gendered behaviors such as contact sports or rough housing. This realization brought them intense feelings of shame for their stigmatized identity and fear at being found out and as such, many non-heterosexual men would excuse themselves from these "manly" gender spheres and instead turn to academics or other pursuits to excel at (Cohler 2009, 285). These men acknowledge themselves as out of place, that is stuck in a liminal space between the death of their self-assumed straightness (the aforementioned pre-liminal phase) and the acknowledgment and acceptance of their sexual orientation by others in their lives (the aforementioned post-liminal phase). In response they seek to create meaning and belonging for themselves in other ways, something that is in line with the first of Douglas' solutions to autonomous pollution; a ritual that does not probe into the cause of the sense of pollution. This divergence into another social realm is to create belonging but does not address the feelings of unbelonging these men experience. Douglas' other solution, the confession, is most in line with the idea of "coming out" as one confesses their secret feelings to a potentially hostile audience. Although both of these solutions are found amongst the men who engage with or make Closeted TikTok content as ways for dealing with the feelings of being out of place, I claim that there is a third and more prominent solution for closeted men who experience autonomous pollution: self-removal and isolation. Throughout my study the narrative of "escaping" was very prominent. Faced with a social sphere where they could not finish the rite of coming out due to extreme structural violence, many fanaticize about leaving their entire social worlds behind and many comments will reinforce the idea that friends and family that do not accept and support those with a non-heteronormative identity are not "true friends" or "aren't your family" and as such should be forgotten about or avoided.

Heterotopic TikTok

These rituals that result in the self-alienation of non-heterosexual men are every day and common place and as such these emotions are pervasive, long standing, and have lasting psychological effects. Psychologist Gregory Herek defines internalized sexual stigma as a non-heterosexual person's acceptance of stigma regarding their sexual identity into their self-concept (Herek 2015, 20) and nowhere else is this more potent than in the comments and videos of Closeted TikTok where videos and commenters discuss how their feelings of self-hatred are due to feeling like something innately bad or not belonging. For more than a few commenters, it has unfortunately led to expressions of suicidal ideation. It is important to note, however, that all this suffering is the direct result of a heteronormative context, thus it is because Closeted TikTok away from heteronormativity that it is a kind of healing oasis. Once again, I turn to Michel Foucault and his concepts of utopias and heterotopias. According to Foucault utopias are not real places but rather a kind of inverted analogy for what exists in real social spaces (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24). For example, one sees utopias in popular culture such as T.V. shows, books, or movies and these imaginary places are considered fantastic and extraordinary because they possess things that do not exist in our own society like total equality or medicine that can heal even the most precarious of cases. A heterotopia, by contrast, is a real place that embodies what already exists in society but isn't normally embodied by other places. Heterotopias are places that possess a non-linear experience of time, bring together things that do not seem like they should be together, and are isolated in such a way that one can sense it being different from all other places (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24-26). Similar studies with online queer communities have termed the social environment as a utopia due to the fact that participants

dream of a world that has little representation in their non-digital lives (Cavalcante 2019, 1723),

or do not utilize these spatial theories at all to analyze the virtual context because their focus is

on relationship repercussions in the physical world (Etengoff, Chana, and Colette Daiute 2015,

291) (Caliskan 2021, 1447). I argue that spatial theories are not only relevant to an analysis of

Closeted TikTok but should be used beyond simply understanding virtual space as an imaginary

utopia. I propose that Closeted TikTok is a heterotopia in itself whose messages of internalized

stigma caused by liminality in a heteronormative environment are an embodiment of sentiments

and experiences that are not normally embodied in our society. The fact that one can watch an

individual traverse the rite of coming out by surveying videos that span over a year in a relatively

short time displays the non-linear time aspect of Closeted TikTok, whilst the pairing of

seemingly picturesque scenes with dialogue expressing internal anguish brings together

otherwise unrelated stimuli into one place. Finally, one is keenly aware when they have made it

to "the closeted side of TikTok" due to the influx of videos sent one's way thanks to the

consistently adaptive nature of TikTok's user algorithm. All these aspects fit well within

Foucault's understandings of heterotopias, but how does such a space form? And why does it

matter?

     I argue that through the process of performative utterance, heterotopias are created on

TikTok, and it is precisely because heterotopias embody what is lacking in other places that they

have the power to make these closeted men feel like matter in place rather than liminally

pollutive matter out of place. For Michael Bérubé, performative utterance is when, simply by

being spoken, words have a transformative affect (Bérubé 2000, 341). For instance, when an

officiant pronounces a couple married, they are not just speaking words but bestowing a new

social status on the couple. By simply discussing the forces that result in a feeling of autonomous

pollution and articulating this otherwise secret world of "the closet" in a video or in its comments section, these Closeted TikTok accounts become heterotopias. The power of heterotopias to be places where the abusively unspoken can become spoken has been documented in other studies such as Moshe Shokeid's research with a gay support group in New York. This group is able to create a place to discuss personal issues that cannot be safely discussed in other places such as searching for "Mr. Right," problems with growing old, and issues with their minority status (Shokeid 2001, 12-14, 18). By talking about these issues that are not embodied anywhere else, they create a place for the embodiment of those issues, thus a heterotopia. However, unlike the men in Shokeid's study, these men on TikTok are unable to meet. They must be hidden via usernames and obscure profile photos but this does not diminish from the heterotopic experience. In fact, the anonymity provided by digital contact has been documented by Gary W. Harper who notes that because bisexual adolescent males can hide their identity online, they feel safe enough to interact with other queer people and explore the ideas of "queerness" safely, which in turn helps them form a self-concept (Harper 2016, 359, 366). Thus, heterotopias can be constructed without direct human contact allowing their power to have an affect even amongst closeted men who have never and may never meet each other.

In summation, I argue that in order to understand internalized sexual stigma and its effects among non-heterosexual men, we must look at the experience of being "in the closet" as being trapped in a liminal phase between a non-heterosexual man's acknowledgment of their sexual identity and reaching an imagined paradise where their sexual identity is no longer a compounding factor in their life nor a plague on their mind. This entrapment, due to a heteronormative and at times violent discursive regime, results in these men internalizing feeling of autonomous pollution, of out of placeness, and a lack of belonging. TikTok's performative

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utterance provides a heterotopia whereby the experiences of these men are shared thus allowing them to feel- for once- like matter in place.

Methods

For this ethnography I chose eight TikTok accounts to study. To finds these accounts I typed "closeted gay" into the search engine of the app and purposefully selected eight accounts that focused more on the experience of the closet and coming out and less on framing the closeted gay or bisexual man as a sexual object to attract porn seeking viewers to an OnlyFans account. After selecting these eight accounts and obtaining IRB approval for this research, I messaged the owners of each account through TikToks direct messaging (DM) feature via a research account that displayed my photo and a bio that stated I am a Georgia State University anthropology student conducting research. If a creator's profile had a linked Instagram account as well, I used my private Instagram to message them through that apps DM feature. In these DMs I explained my goal to conduct research on Closeted TikTok and its impact on experiences with the closet and internalized sexual stigma. I then asked if the account owner would be interested in participating in the study by letting me observe their account and potentially interview them. Of the eight I messaged, only three creators messaged me back, two of whom agreed to be interviewed. Due to the public nature of these accounts (meaning that anyone can view and interact with these creators' videos), I felt comfortable observing and doing a thematic analysis on the content of videos and comment sections on the profiles of creators who did not respond to my DM without violating any ethical considerations. Both creators who agreed to be interviewed participated in a semi-structured interview that was based on their experiences with the closet and coming out as well as their process of creating videos and interacting with TikTok.

Interviews were conducted over the video chat feature of Instagram and were audio recorded with the explicit consent of the creators. Each interview was then thematically analyzed for those same topics. Each of these creators were also given an informed consent form describing the nature of the project and their rights as a participant.

I then developed an unobtrusive observation protocol that guided my data collection for each TikTok account. I would first watch every video on each TikTok account and would take general notes, breaking down each video's message into thematic categories and write down quotes I found particularly fascinating. After this I would choose six videos at random to conduct an in-depth observation where I took detailed notes of the visual and auditory aspects of each video as well as recorded any words typed or spoken and the sentimental impact it had on me, the viewer. For three of these videos, I also conducted an ethogram- or list of all behaviors being displayed at one time (Barnard 2018, 324)- of the comment section where I separated the comments into themes, recorded the frequency of such themes, and wrote down at least one example. Due to time considerations, I unfortunately had to cut two TikTok accounts from my study and only do ethograms for 4.5 of the accounts. Any and all revealing data was obscured in my note taking/data collection and any and all data collected was maintained on my locked personal computer. Printed or handwritten information was also kept in a secure location. All names (legal or otherwise) and identifying information have been obscured via photographic manipulation or pseudonyms. All photos presented here (with the exception of figure 3.1) are screenshots from the accounts of Hugo and JD, two key consultants and interviewees who are discussed in depth bellow. Both Hugo and JD have read this paper and approved of all data present. All excerpts of typed words presented on TikTok videos appear in this article as they do on the original video including syntax or spelling divergences. In what follows, I provide a

virtual field description of TikTok and an in-depth look at a few TikTok creators and their

content that I think best represent how these accounts create a heterotopia that allows men to feel

in place during their stigmatized liminal experience.

A Virtual Field Description

Like the other social media apps that have dominated the lives of my generation, TikTok is

overwhelming. As soon as one taps the small dark icon on their phone screen with its white

quarter note logo sounds and sights leap out and attack. You are greeted by video after video,

each one taking up the entire size of your phone screen. They are meant to hold your attention in

short bursts with each video lasting no more than 60 seconds and most far less than that. Like its

predecessors, the user is supposed to see, like, swipe, and move on allowing the bright flashes of

color and various musical styling to create an almost blasé feeling, like an urbanite in Simmel's

modernist metropolis (Simmel 1971, 329). Like every Facebook timeline, each Twitter poll, and

the endless stream of Instagram selfies, TikToks follow a predictable format.

Each video fills the screen with the exception of a small black band at the bottom that

possesses the words "Home," "Discover," Inbox," and "Profile." Each of these has their own

icon placed above it: a silhouette of a box and triangle house with a door, a magnifying glass, a

square speech bubble with a line in the center, and an outline of the U-shaped torso and circle

head of a person. Above this lies an eighth note symbol that seems to engulf moving letters that

indicate the name of the sound being played during the video in case another creator wanted to

use it. To the right is a small spinning vinyl record that possesses a photo of the sound's creator

in the center. As the record turns it spews out quarter and eighth notes. Over this line lies the

infamous hashtags which follow the same pattern as those first used on Twitter: a brief caption

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about the video followed by "#" and simple one-word typological indexes that links the video in question to others that the creator deems relevant. The top row of this bottom section possesses the username of the creator which serves as a link one may click on to view the rest of their videos. On the right-hand side of the screen is the requisite "Like," "Comment," and "Share" links with their heart, speech bubble and three dots, and arrow pointing right icons whose existence and style was made popular by the social media founding fathers, Myspace and Facebook. At the top of these icons is the creator's user photo and a small red button with a white cross that would allow the user to "follow" the creator; a term meaning to be added to a list of other users who seek to show support for a creator and to have their videos shown in the "Following" section of the app. At the top of the screen, just before where a cell phone indicates time, reception status, Wi-Fi quality, and battery percentage, are a row of icons meant to streamline how to find content. In the top left corner contains an icon that resembles a T.V. with the words "LIVE" splitting it in half. Clicking on this icon would bring the user to a series of videos being filmed in real time, like a live T.V. special. They feature creators talking to their viewers, interacting with others, and/or doing some sort of activity. These videos are slow in pace and tend to drag on whilst viewers grapple to get the attention of these self-made celebrities via "gifts" or small emojis that can be purchased by a viewer and sent during a live stream in front of all who are watching. These gifts are then translated into a monetary donation for the creator and become one of the many ways a "TikToker" can make a living on the app. Next to the LIVE icon lies the word "Following" which possess the videos made by creators that a user has followed. At the far end is another magnifying glass icon that is meant for users to employ when wanting to find a specific creator, sound, or theme of video. None of these tools are new to the world of social media. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, and TikTok all use such a

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similar format that someone only needs to be familiar with one app to know how to employ the

rest. It's a tired formula and to my generation, manipulating it comes as naturally as using a

Walkman did for kids in the 80s. There is one aspect of TikTok though that breaks though the

monotony of sights, sounds, and blasé attitudes that characterize social media applications.

The "For You" page or "FYP" as it is colloquially known, has its icon located right next to

the "Following" icon. The Following page is predictable. The user knows who they follow, the

frequency with which this collection posts new content, and what themes these videos will

address. The Following page is passive, the user just sits and watches. The FYP by contrast is

active. It is here that TikTok's famed algorithm comes into play. The app shows you a series of

videos it calculates you will like. The more likes you give a type of video or the longer you

interact with it, the more videos with similar content the app will show you. A kind of profile of

the user is developed so that new things are shown to a user that the app has determined they will

enjoy. This was revolutionary in the social media realm. Whilst other sites like Facebook and

Instagram are more like the Following page, where the user simply sits and lets the information

hit them, TikTok's active user engagement allowed users to sit for hours whilst being engrossed

by videos addressing themes that deeply impact or amuse them.

When I first downloaded the app at the height of the pandemic, I was just coming to terms

with my sexual identity. Slowly I was presented on my FYP with videos focusing on themes like

living in the closet, experiencing same sex attraction, and a constant stream of "celebrities who

turned me gay" videos from which I gathered that Chris Evans is the homophobe's anti-Christ,

spawning queer men every time he appears shirtless on screen. These creators would film in

everyday backgrounds: their cars, bedrooms, and living rooms which gave the intimate feeling of

knowing these men who I have never met. They use different lighting via LED strips on their

walls to convey emotions like passion or anger. They employed music from queer artists like Lil

Nas X or Callum Scott or played romantic ballades that had become popular on every dimension

of the app. These videos seemed simple yet impacted me deeply. I remember watching a young

gay couple, not much older than me, wrestling on a bed with a simple white comforter. They

were in grey sweatpants and oversized hoodies and the room was a soft white blue from the LED

strips that hung where the wall meets the sealing. Their voices were obscured by the soft,

melodic lyrics of whatever love song the app's users and algorithm had made popular that week.

One man eventually got the upper hand over the other and pinned him to the bed before meeting

him in a soft kiss that matched the tender sentimentalities of the ballad and the lighting. The

softness of their touches rivaled that of their hoodies and bed. Their intimacy was on full display

for anyone and everyone to like, share, and comment. And there I was. Looking through a

pixeled window at a world that seemed possible yet impossible, familiar yet foreign, close yet

far.

 I later learned that this was called the "Gay Side of TikTok" which essentially means the user

interacted with the algorithm enough that it identified them as having a non-heterosexual

romantic preference and shows them videos featuring same sex romantic attractions or

experiences. It is from the Gay Side of TikTok that I discovered the enclave that would become

my field site; "Closet TikTok." The first videos I saw initially followed the same pattern as the

others. They had purposeful colored lighting, popular sounds, similar hashtags like "#gay #lgbt"

but the user never shows their face and instead selected only parts of their body and environment

to display. A shoulder and neck in one video, a leg in another, a shadow, a black screen, a

picturesque view from some hiking trails were all I had to watch. The audio was normally the

voice of a text-to-speech feature TikTok offers creators that allows them to post captions on their

videos and then have an automated voice reads them. The app has tried to make them sound more human, but it comes out as forced and aggressive, like as if Siri decided to become an angry middle-aged person yelling at a customer service representative. It lacks all the nuances that characterize human language. These robots speak of the fear of coming out, the hope for a utopic future when they do, vignettes that display scenes of homophobia and stigma, and flirtatious encounters with members of the same sex. It is from this chopped up assemblages of humanity, these sections of bodies, fragments of real and artificial voices, shorthanded descriptions of discriminatory experiences, and quickly articulated vignettes that I attempt to understand closeted life on this familiar and yet strangely unique social media platform.

Hugo and Coming Out as a Rite of Passage

Hugo, a gay white man and American ex-patriot, is everything one desires in a twenty something year-old. His TikTok videos show a man who is incredibly active and full of life. His account features beautiful vistas of mountain peaks and rivers crowded with woods (such as those in figure 1.1) and he manipulates the camera in a way that transcends the normal millennial/gen z talent that comes with growing up around smart phones. In the few instances that we see his body, he is clean shaven and muscular which prompts great flirtatious appreciation in the comments. In our interview, he is charming and introspective. He laughs at himself when he struggles to articulate his social reality even though his answers were so clear and profound that I consider our interaction to be one of the most informative and enjoyable interviews I have ever done. His deep baritone voice betrays his trepidation at interacting with a researcher during the initial moments of our conversation, but after the 30-minute mark I could almost hear his contagious smile despite never seeing his face. Young, active, talented, attractive,

charming, intelligent, and charismatic, Hugo could be that kindhearted, popular, jock high schooler at the center of any young adult romance novel. Yet his TikToks and our interview show a man trapped in the rite of coming out.

One of the earlier videos on Hugo's account discusses the pre-liminal stage of the rite of coming out: when one admits their non-heterosexual identity. In the video (a screenshot of which can be found in figure 1.2) Hugo is standing near a body of water and continuously places his hand in it before turning it over and watching the water slips away as if he is grasping something he cannot hold. The background music is a dramatic ballad that was made popular on TikTok by another creator and whose lyrics embody one's desire to die in the arms of a loved one. The words he flashes on the screen are as follows:

> You know what moment made me 100% sure that I was gay It's the time when my old best friend got his first girlfriend as soon as he told me I became speechless. I felt my heart sink and I felt sensations that I have never experienced before like something has been taken away from me.

His narrative displays a moment where his homosexual identity or desires are not something he can deny any longer. Coming out to oneself is discussed frequently by Hugo and Closeted TikTok creators as the pre-requisite to coming out to others. One TikTok creator, JD who is discussed below, even mentioned it as a kind of death in one of his videos. As Hugo displays through the words "made me 100% sure that I was gay" there is an end to the self-assumed heterosexual identity, a ritual death, that launched one into the act of coming out.

An earlier video showcases the liminal phase of this rite, the actual "coming out" or disclosure of one's non-heteronormative identity to another. This part of the rite of passage, however, is the most feared and it is because of reactions similar to those that Hugo dreads in this video that many stay in liminality. In a short nine-second TikTok, Hugo shows himself barefoot and sitting on a rock at an unidentified beach. The sand is a light gray color that has

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been pulverized into a flat, downward curve sloping towards the ocean by the waves. It still possesses a wet quality to it from before the tide moved back to its low tidal state. As Hugo pans the camera from side to side, the immediate shoreline becomes one long panorama of white water with flat, puffy clouds on the horizon that appear to have just delivered a storm to the coast and are now departing to wreak their havoc elsewhere. The camera cuts to Hugo jumping off the rock he was sitting on and into the smooth sand bellow where he then proceeds to walk down the beach before the video fades to black. On the screen in large black letters with white boarders are the following words:

> My biggest fear about coming out is disappointing my mom, she would blame herself she constantly asks about me when am I going to bring a girl home and how she really wants to have grandchildren.

The fear of rejection, of hate, of disappointment is what keeps so many men in the closet. In order to keep up with a façade of heterosexual normalcy and avoid this stigma many closeted men take careful precautions to perform straightness. In several videos and comments this is described as developing another persona where closeted men will make up relationships or develop excuses for why their lack of sexual and romantic partners in order to navigate rituals that reproduce gender norms (of which heterosexuality is a part) such as group conversations about sexual encounters. This conflict between personas is a source of intense stress but the heteronormative discourses that surrounds these men everyday keeps them in this liminal "closeted" space. But what is it that these men are hoping for when they come out? What keeps them dreaming about life "out of the closet?"

The answer comes from two of Hugo's videos: one displays the ideal scenario of coming out and post-liminal existence, whilst the other displays the reality of coming out in a heteronormative world. The first video starts with Hugo sitting on the banks of a river before

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getting up and walking into it. He then faces the camera down so that we can see his bare torso and feet. The video then shifts to show of a golden retriever playing in presumably the same river before shifting two more times; first to some sort of large stone church built in a colonial Spanish style, and second to a bridge overlooking another river with the caption "Reunited at last" typed on the bottom. The river in question can be seen in Figure 1.3. The photos appear and disappear in an instance and a heavily edited, melancholic song called "medicine <3" plays in the background. His words posted on the video are read as follows by a mechanical masculine voice:

> When you're coming out to someone the best kind of reaction is sometimes no reaction. I came out to a close friend after having known each for more than three years. I asked him if he was offended that I didn't tell him before. He said it doesn't change anything and that he didn't care at all who I liked.

This is the end goal, a reality where one's sexual identity no longer negatively impacts them socially or personally. The secret is out in the open where it can no longer torture the mind of the closeted man and his identity is accepted by others in a way that does not negatively transform their pre-existing relationships. However, the reality is that there is no finality to coming out, the individual never *truly* leaves the liminal phase forever. In Hugo's third video on his account he is sitting on what appears to be a deck with his legs resting on a chair. A feminine robotic voice recites the following words in an overly happy tone:

> you know what's the worst part about coming out? It's that you have to keep doing it for the rest of your life with every new person.

The caption of the video also reads: "You never know how people would react either 😔 #closeted #lgbt #closetedgayboy." This is the reality of coming out. Even though it is a rite of passage with its pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal phases, the post-liminal ideal is not obtainable in a heteronormative society where one's sexual orientation is assumed to be heterosexual. One must constantly place themselves in the precarity of coming out again and

again having to decide who and in what social sphere to tell. In our interview Hugo told me that being out is "reaching that critical mass of people that it's no longer such a secret… not having to worry or think about it." He tells me through chuckled laughs and short pauses that to reach this critical mass one would have to be open about their sexuality and let the information travel around their different social circles via gossip. But how can one put that information into their social circles so that repetitive coming out is no longer required when actors within those circles are the very people these men have reason to fear coming out to? Here Hugo is trapped in liminality. He cannot reach this desired space where his sexual identity and negotiating its expression does not dominate his mind but instead is trapped in the closet continuously. But what does it look like to live perpetually in liminality?

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3

JD: Living as Matter Out of Place

JD's TikTok page holds a special place in my heart. Indeed, it was his videos that inspired this project but beyond that, it has been his videos that have consistently impacted me. JD, a white, bisexual, American man in his late 20s, is an artist. His videos are clever collections of light and sound that are as poetic and vulnerable as the messages they embodied. What is so unique about JD's account though, is the vulnerability he places himself in as the creator. Out of all of the creators I studied, he was the one that showed the most of himself on camera. Most of the time he simply shows the back of his body or his feet, but he is not afraid to show an entire

half of his face either. One can see his dirty blonde hair that is shorter on the sides but longer on the top, his bright blue eyes, his pale skin, and even his ears that seem to be prominently tipped at the top reminding me of a character from fantasy novels. His room is a featured aspect in his videos and is unique to say the least. One of the walls is covered from head to toe in a collage that has no immediately discernible theme and are only stopped by two door frames and the boarder of his ceiling. Even this border is decorated. In the space where the sealing meets the collage there is a strip of light that has changed colors throughout his videos and is covered by what appears to be cotton or some other fluffy material that gives the allusion that clouds have descended and formed a halo around his room. On the ceiling itself are bright yellow dots that are scattered on a blue background and alternates between light and dark shades to give the illusion of a night sky. When all of this visual stimulus is combined in a video, it gives the appearance of another world altogether-one that is separate from our own and not only embodies the kind of liminal space that he as a closeted man inhabits but, when combined with some of his other videos, shows how internalizing one sense of self-pollution removes them from their social world.

Disappearance or leaving his social sphere is something very prominent in JD's videos; one video even displayed a fantasy where the viewer in shown photos of moving trucks and boxes that then lead into photos of two men in affectionate and romantic poses. This displays how the ideal post-liminal world cannot exist in the same terrain as the pre-liminal one for some closeted men, and that finally leaving the liminal space of out of placeness would require physical movement. In one of the videos that impacted me the most, JD physically and discursively shows us just how much one can feel out of place when trapped in the closet. Figure 2.1 is a screenshot of this video where JD is featured sitting alone in the snow at night in what is

presumably his apartment complex (it has been featured in other videos). The following passage

is spoken in the form of an audio clip taken form a video made by a different creator and the

following words are typed in the top left corner of the video:

> Do you ever just really want to disappear like, just get away and start a new life
> somewhere else cause for me, I've gotten to the point where no amount of driving really
> helps anymore and its getting really overwhelming and realy just like I hate being in this
> town, and I hate the people in it, and I hate- I mean, I enjoy I dont know just, it sucks and
> I really wanna get away."

JD's use of audio is compounded by the physical placement of his body. He is literally out in the

cold, alone, with no one to comfort him despite being literally surrounded by warm homes. His

black attire provides a stark contrast to the white snow falling around him. His is completely and

utterly out of place. The combination of the physical out of placeness with the narrative of

disappearing communicates to the viewer that the two sentiments are interconnected. It is

because he feels that he does not belong that he must leave as he can no longer take sitting alone

in the cold whilst those around him enjoy warmth.

This sentiment becomes explicitly tied to the experience of the closet in later videos that

are posed as responses to the comments of viewers. In one video, JD responds to the comment, "I

feel like coming out is like revealing every secret a person could possible burry inside

themselves in a single word." JD's decides to take this comment and extend on his experience

with the closet. With white lettered words pasted over a video of him driving alone on an

abandoned street on a misty night (figure 2.2) he says:

> do you know what its like living inside the closet? being reminded of it everyday and not
> being able to escape it because you can never bring anyone to events you dont have
> anyone to talk to when youre going through a hard time you feel even more lonely when
> your straight friends talk about relationships the person you have a crush on will probably
> never be able to like you back. all of the relationships you have are in question because
> you hear all the things they'd be saying behind your back because they have no idea the
> closet seems more like a prison and i dont want a life sentence but im not sure how to get
> out

Here JD displays an inability to participate fully in socialization due to his liminal position. His life is essentially a secret to all around him where he is more of a viewer than a participant and it is through everyday reminders of his non-belonging that this sentiment becomes solidified. What's worse, his double consciousness about the reality of his heteronormative society may make the closet a part of his armor against homophobia (something reflected not just by JD and Hugo but also in the comments of one of JD's videos) but it also makes every relationship of his seem insincere. He knows that he treads a line between being loved and being persecuted and is reminded of it every day. Even his most intimate relationships are affected. In our interview, JD and I were discussing when he first knew he was not straight and how college catalyzed the pre-liminal acceptance of his sexual identity. In his highly reflexive and self-analytical raspy tone JD told me, "So I had a long-term relationship and then there's always that part that was missing, I think. I was unable to fully be myself so I think that took away from their relationship and that could have been better if I would have been more honest…" Romantic relationships, considered to be some of the most intimate, are not spared from out of place sentiments either. Furthermore, it was not JD's feelings for his partner were false even though it was a heterosexual relationship. JD identifies as bi-sexual so regardless of how real his feelings were for his partner, it is the fact that he is consistently reminded that he does not belong that resulted in the relationship's end. Once again, JD's videos reflect a more passive engagement in his life, a sentiment that is beautifully embodied by the video. Driving around aimlessly, in the dark, on an abandoned road, with no real direction is similar to how he simply moves through the motions of his social world with no real attachment. He is made to be alone despite being surrounded by the open road of social possibilities .

Unfortunately, these experiences of isolation compound in horrifically negative ways that in extreme cases may result in suicidal ideation. In one video JD responds to the comment, "it took me becoming depressed and planning my own death to realize that i needed to come out as gay." Out of concern for JD's privacy I will not provide a screenshot of this video as a large portion of his face is prominent. The video shows the upper left portion of his face in such a way that the viewers' attention is drawn directly towards his blue eye which pairs well with the purple glowing clouds and blue ceiling that characterize his room. His normally reflexive and laid-back tone has an almost "I told you so" feel to it that reveals his frustration as he says,

> More than once I've heard my friends complain about gay pride and 'why did they have to make that character gay?' but this is why. Seeing these comments and hearing similar stories, I resented who I was for so long and denied it that I had constant panic attacks where I could never focus. It consumed me until I finally made myself go to therapy and tell a few people who I trusted. When faced with death we realize we never got a chance to live to begin with. Which can be just as terrifying. We live in a world where some of us would rather die than be who we are. It's the dark truth.

This passage perfectly sums up the everyday ways that these non-heterosexual men are made to feel out of place and internalize their sexual stigma. This internalization results in the individual turning blame and anger inward, believing there is something wrong with them rather than with the discursive regime. Whilst the above examples display the general feeling of out of placeness, this passage describes how internalized sexual stigma and the autonomous pollution created by out of placeness results in closeted individuals removing themselves from social worlds. Although suicide is an extreme example, the sentiment is the same across Closeted TikTok where commenters exclaim that if your parents or friends make you feel like you do not belong because of your sexuality, that you must cast them aside as "fake friends" or "fake family" which, of course, would be a form of societal self-isolation. JD expanded on this idea during one of our interviews when I asked him to describe the closet. He said, "You don't feel like you

belong anywhere, you feel like you're the only one. You don't feel like you can trust anybody or share anything." *There must be someone*, I thought as I processed the self-isolation that a feeling of mistrust towards the world indicates.

"Mmhm and how do you mitigate that? How did you deal with that?" I say, hating myself for asking a question twice in a row.

"Work, school, distracting yourself" he says in a steady voice.

I try and probe deeper, "Distracting okay. Did you have anyone that you didn't have to worry about that with?"

His answer was short and to the point, "No."

JD later explains that after having come out, he does have friends with whom he can actually confide, with whom he does not feel out of place and does not have to self-isolate. But never family. JD has reached the post-liminal phase, but unfortunately many are still stuck in the liminal world where they internalize the out of placeness that sparks an internal war, gently, slowly, painfully, tearing down at their psyche every day. How many are not as fortunate as JD or I? How many have already lost their lives to rid the world of the burden of themselves? How many people has our society killed by jabbing a knife straight through the closet door and into the heart of some youth in pervasive and elusive everyday ways? Perhaps more importantly, how many people has Closeted TikTok saved by being a place where these experiences can be articulated? Where these men are no longer out of place?
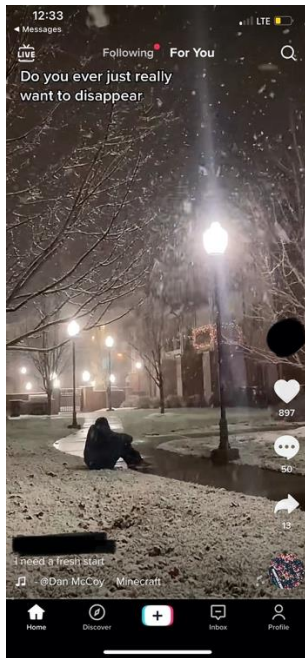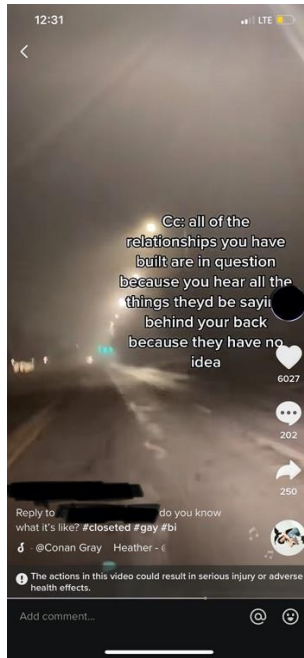
Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

A Heterotopia in Action

Adam's TikTok was the most controversial among viewers. He discusses what it is like to be in the closet and his hope for a post-liminal future but his videos also tend to be sensual and, unlike the other TikTok accounts, explicitly asks for followers. Figure 3.1 is a chart of the various bodily regions that are shown by Closeted TikTokers. At one point or another Adam has displayed all of these regions on his page, although not all at once. Most of his videos tend to focus on zone VI and VII and are done in sensual ways. We are shown images of his underwear bands and bulge from an up-close bird's eye view. At times we are also greeted with a flash of skin from his lower torso or a bare thigh. Adam also utilizes zones I and II but does so shirtless and as image 3.2 displays, can even possess explicitly flirtatious comments whilst highlighting muscles or chiseled features. The flirting is not one sided in the slightest. In fact, even some seemingly innocent videos on other accounts may have dozens of commenters offering sexual or romantic relations to the creator. This eroticism is one way Closeted TikTok's heterotopia is

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formed. These men live in heteronormative societies and although flirting and its style of

learning by experience is something shared with their heterosexual counterparts, when non-

heteronormative men flirt with other men, they risk not only rejection but homophobic actions

and sentiments. These TikTok accounts, however, are spaces where men can flirt with each other

across time and space and not have to fear homophobic backlash. Thus, these flirtatious

interactions are just one way that Closeted TikTok forms a heterotopia via performative

utterance; their virtual interactions build this safe place that is a kind of rarity.

A key part of heterotopias is that their boundaries are marked and in the case of Closeted

TikTok, its boundaries are formed and maintained via the comments section. At times,

homophobic statements make their way to the comment sections. Their existence is rare and

infrequent which is, in part, most likely due to the segregationist algorithm of modern social

media apps. However, when such comments do arise they are quickly suppressed by a horde of

Closeted TikTok viewers. What follows are two complete altercations that occurred after

homophobic comments were left on a video discussing life in the closet. The video was posted

on Adam's account and discussed how he came out to his best friend over Snapchat who then

refused to respond and screenshotted his confession to share with their mutual friends. Whist the

first excerpt was started by a homophobic comment, the second excerpt was started by a

supportive primary commenter and then responded to by a secondary homophobic commenter. I

have copied the typos and emojis in order to preserve the feeling of chaos and confusion that

accompanies these interactions:

> **Commenter 1:** your bsf is awesome
> **Creator**: ur rude
> **Commenter 2:** Hey hope you are ok at the end of the day you are who you
> are and can't help that fuck people that don't accept you
> **Commenter 3:** that is not ok to make fun of someone like that and I hope that
> your life will go to shit.

Commenter 1: what's wrong wit her bsg she's normal
Commenter 4: ong
Commenter 5: no…
Commenter 6: yes
Commenter 1: nah im coolin.
Commenter 7: no cap
Commenter 8: K urself
Commenter 9: ikr
Commenter 10: No tf, putting someone sometimes can cause suicide of detrimental to someones mental health
Commenter 1: what-
Commenter 11: 😐😑😐
Commenter 1: you good bro?
Commenter 11: no just not homophobic. U?
Commenter 1: I'm good I'm jus normal
Commenter 11: its ok. i dont want to waste my time. you clearly just want attention. its fine you didnt come out yet. 👋
Commenter 1: come out of where? im straight ty.
Commenter 12: How u homophobic in 2020 my love
Commenter 13: U have 1 follower and you're private calm down 😂
Commenter 1: whats wrong wit having no vids? im not a tik toker ima shit taker 😂

Commenter 1: That is not a friend I'm so sorry 😳
    Commenter 2: exactly
    Commenter 3: That is a friend ahahahah
    Commenter 4: how
    Commenter 5: no it isn't
    Commenter 3: Oh yeah!!! Imma accept a friend who is a serial killer ! 😆
    Commenter 6: you're comparing murders to gay people? How does that make sense?
    Commenter 3: Doing sins on purpose
    Commenter 6: Lmaooo please 😂
    Commenter 7: At the end of the day we are all sinners. Ure point. Also what happens if u friend isn't even religious? Plus being gay isn't hurting someone
    Commenter 3: It's not the same when someone is doong it on purpose and accidentally so end of the story. 😆
    Commenter 7: U think gays choose who they love. They chose to be oppressed and shamed from society and their family. Only be trumselves Ure a sinner ureself for hating not loving. Guess what imma going to hell now cuase I swear about 10 times everyday
    Commenter 3: Ofc u do

Commenter 7: Ofc I do. Cuase imma teenager and majority of them do that. I mean gordan Ramsey must be satan top list. Notice how u only replied to this comment

Creator 3: I told you they go to hell won't reply anymore. May God help you 😆. Btw I'm teenage too and I don't swear so don't try to find a reason for that 😆

Creator 7: U just sinned. Ure hating and not loving 😆. Imma not finding excuses imma just saying that 6 billion of the population is going to hel eveninfluencer

Commenter 8: ohh is this how muslim are? im not surprised islamphobe still going on

Commenter 3: No wonder why people are attacking lgbt 😆 (cuz they dumb and need help)

Commenter 9: Sorry but aren't youb the one without a pf spreading hate under a comment on a tiktok of another human… I don't know what you believe, but I always learned the bible said that u have to be kind and respective to other humans so who is sinning>

Commenter 3: I'm normal not sick 😆

Although these comments do not result in the homophobic statement being redacted, an apology from the commenter, or a sense of overall justice, the very fact that dozens of people will berate and even wish death upon a commenter that represents heteronormative reality shows how the heterotopia's boundaries are maintained. In many cases, the creator will even block the commenter which literally bans them from the virtual place. It is through this process of identifying what is intolerable that the heterotopia is reproduced; what belongs here is what is not normally embodied, not what is already present in the physical realties of these men.

This heterotopia is not just a land of homophobe mobbing and open flirtation. Discussing the liminal phase of the closet and its impact on individual lives also contributes to the creation and maintenance of heterotopic Closeted TikTok. This point was illuminated to me during my interview with Hugo when he said, "…I wish I had TikTok growing up honestly like if I had something like that you know where you- uh where people are so free expressing themselves and just you know… uh knowing that you're not alone it's definitely a powerful thing." His voice reached a volume peak on the word "wish" before slowly coming back down for the word

"alone" that seemed almost half stuck in his mouth. Hugo is not a man who wears his heart on his sleeve, but in this instance, pain was audible in the roller-coaster of his volume.

"What's that like knowing that maybe there's some, I don't know, 15-year-old boy somewhere watching your stuff and relating to that?" I said. I couldn't bite back my own emotions when asking this question. My voice felt caught in my chest. I remember the world of difference that one gay romance novel made for me and I wanted to express to Hugo that I understand the importance of representation on more than just a sympathetic level. I followed up with, "You know getting that kind of… that acceptance that you and I never got when we were that age."

Hugo responds in short bursts followed by brief pauses, "A lot of times I would get messages from people telling me 'you know I've never told this to anybody this is the first time where I'm even writing down this word but I'm gay and you're the first person I've ever told.' Then when I see the fact that I was able to reach a person and having them trust me enough to just write me that message… and tell me how much my videos have helped them. Really let's say it uh really encourages me to keep going…" An ambulance's siren goes off in the background from his end of the call and I find it oddly appropriate. Hugo is no paramedic but, in a way, he delivers aid too. His aid comes through a screen and is supplemented by music and scenery and whilst the paramedic focuses on the body, Hugo focuses on the person. By simply discussing his experiences on his account, Hugo is creating a space that embodies what is not embodied in many other places in our society. His performative utterance creates the heterotopia. This heterotopia is so powerful, it provides such a strong feeling of acceptance, of in placeness rather than out of placeness that people are comfortable enough to perform the rite of coming out virtually even if they cannot perform it in their physical lives. Nowhere else is this power better

seen than in the comments of these videos. Figures 3.3 and 3.4 are of a screenshot of comments posted under a video made my JD where he asks how people think being gay is a choice whilst showing a video of a gorgeous beach, two seemingly opposing stimuli. The comments display the out of placeness these men experience and the many ways that they are made to feel as such every day. Most importantly for the heterotopia, the comments circumvent any attempt at homophobic comments. If one were to open the comment section to post something invalidating, they would be flooded with not only the subjective realities of these men, but with the reality that they have taken part in an oppressive system. The sheer number of these comments may also serve as an implicit warning to potential homophobic commenters: "look how many of us there are, still want to try something? You are outnumbered." There is a remarkable beauty in the fact that this video was made on August 16, 2021 and I am able to view it as I write this in November of that same year. These stories, these feelings, these realities still exist today like monuments, standing quietly yet powerfully against an ever-bustling internet. This ability to cross time and space, to embody what has been left unembodied, to pair seemingly opposing stimuli, and to maintain its boundaries through words is what makes Closeted TikTok a healing heterotopia. I will let JD's words testify to what this healing looks like:

> I think I needed to do something to like try and release or make you know make something that I could kind of put everything down like on paper or you know write something so it wasn't just wasn't in my head anymore and I think I've always wanted to make something like that for people like me who struggled like that… I mean just making those people feel less alone or giving them a path. You know, something to model after because like you- like I said before it just felt really hard to navigate anything and figure out all of it on your own.
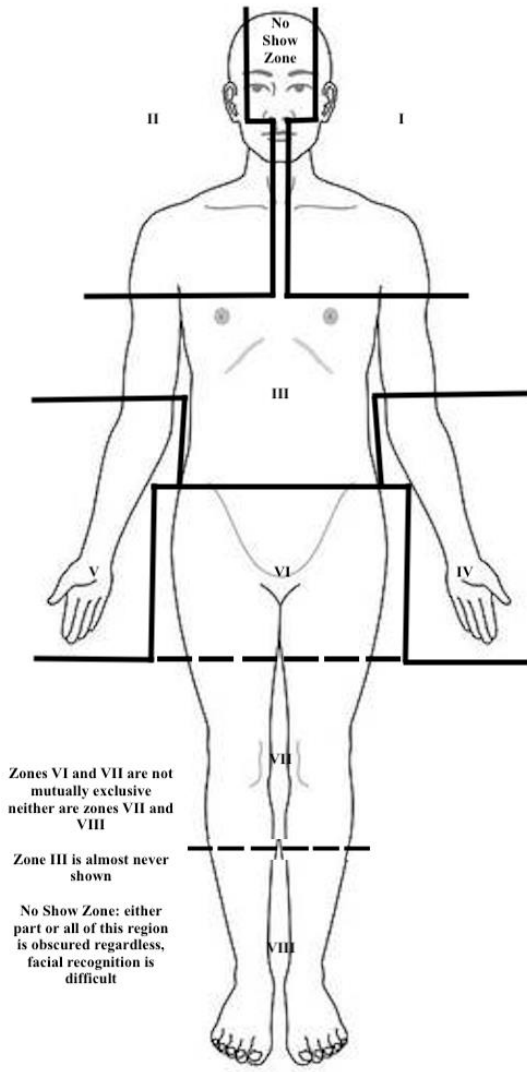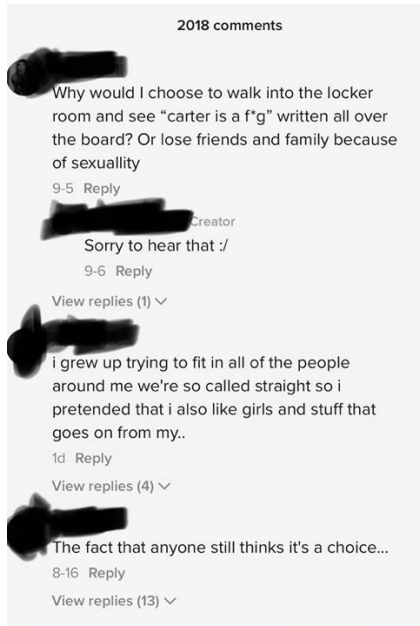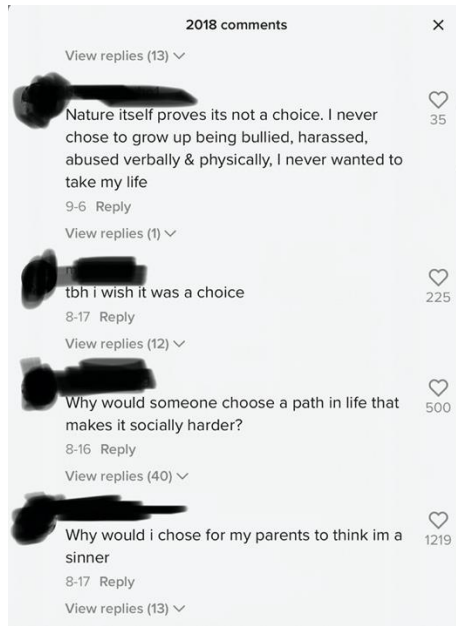
Figure 3.1

Figure 3.2

Figure 3.3

Figure 3.4

Why We Should Care

The heterotopia of Closeted TikTok is a safe haven for men trapped in liminality; for those who cannot leave the closet and enter the desired post-liminal world of "being out," for those who view themselves as pollution and self-isolate from society, for those who internalize abusively narrow-minded views of humanity and feel that the world would rather see them in a grave than holding hands with another man. Kathryn Kozaitis' research with middle class Greeks during the country's debt crisis displays how liminality is only bearable when there is an end, a hope, when the post-liminal in site (Kozaitis 2021, 166). As she described in one our class discussions and in reference to Alexander-Nathani's research with migrants trapped at the European Union's externalized African borders, people will stay in liminality so long as the dream is still possible. To quote one of Alexander-Nathani's interlocutors in that same research, "I will make it to Europe, or I will die trying" (Alexander-Nathani 2021, 208). If I were to translate this for the men whose art I observed the sentence would read, "I will come out of the closet, or I will die in it."

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Everyone fights their own secret wars in their heads, but when you are in the closet it is a war of attrition to get to that post-liminal paradise. Some will carry deep scars forever. In all my life, I have never met someone who has spent time in the liminal battlefield of the closet and has not emerged with some psychological harm. Anxiety, depression, anger management issues, substance abuse, eating disorders, trust issues, intimacy issues, suicidal ideation, self-harm; I have never known a single queer person who does not have at least one of these war wounds, including myself. This is not to say that there none, but that the prevalence of psychological injuries is overwhelming. Others decide that they will retreat to win. Hugo moved to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean because his social environment in the United States may have kept him in the closet indefinitely. Many commenters describe reshaping their entire social environment by severing ties with those who do not support them, even family. This retreat from loved ones is not youthful rebellion, this is the only way that they can survive themselves. Still, too many lose the battle and die in liminality whether by their own hand or that of fate.

As a student of anthropology in the post-post-modern era, I am constantly challenged to think of reciprocity. How can I give back to the people who have given me nine credit-hours and made my early graduation possible? How do I repay them for contributing to my knowledge of humanity and occupying a space in my curriculum vitae? Due to the removed nature of this study and its time constrains, the best I can say I have done is presented a preliminary attempt at understanding an important topic for future academic inquiry. However, I do offer this: If you have read this work having believed that sexual identity is a choice, if you have read this work believing that homosexuality is a perversion of nature, if you have read this work not understanding why you son or daughter cannot just shut up around grandma and grandpa or "tone down the 'gay'" in public I ask you to suspend yourself for a moment. I want you to

picture yourself in your mind and identify the things you take for granted. Think of the aspects of yourself that comes naturally to you: the way you talk, how you stand, your favorite things, the way you feel about those closest to you, the way you feel about your spouse or significant other. Now imagine that part of you, that intrinsic thing about you whose origins may be unknown, as outside of yourself like some sort of orb. Imagine that orb being hated. Imagine everyone you love staring at it, spitting at it, cursing it, hoping that you spend an eternal life and afterlife full of pain and suffering because of it. Picture yourself hiding it: trying to tuck it under your shirt, shove it in your pocket, throw it away. That may stop them from thinking that you possess an orb but they have not stopped talking about the orb. Now they kick and curse and spit at someone else who also has this orb and with every hateful word they spew the orb in your hands grows. You panic as it gets bigger and bigger asking God, "Why me? What did I do? What's wrong with me?" You begin to beat yourself with the orb, hoping that it will break if you hit yourself hard enough until you finally look in the mirror and realize you do not recognize the bruised and bloody face staring back at you. Now replace you face with that of your child, your sibling, your friend and transform the faces of the people around them into your own. This is the closeted reality. If you think for one moment you are going to "save" your loved one from their sin, you are adding to the bloodshed. If you think for one moment that they are choosing their sexuality, ask yourself if being beaten everyday constitutes a choice. I beg of you, alongside your child and everyone who has ever beaten themselves with who they are, find the humanity in the person you are meant to love or else, at the end of the day, they may be forced to choose between your acceptance and life… and I pray to God that they choose life.

Special Images

The Things We Hide: Images from one of JD's videos displaying the sentiments of being trapped in liminality, the feelings of out of placeless that emerge from that positionality, and the subsequent consequences.

Precarity in Coming Out: Bellow are screenshots of a video made by Hugo where he describes wanting to come out to a friend until he discovered her homophobia by asking her about LGBTQ+ rights. He ended up "ghosting her" (a term meaning to cut someone out of your social world by simply ending all contact with them). The scaling of the cliff is symbolic of the social dangers men like Hugo face.

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