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# American Essentialism, Weirdo Habitus, and the Tensions of Queer Performativity

Michael-Anthony Claytor

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by

Michael-Anthony Claytor

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ABSTRACT

From April to September 2023, I conducted ethnographic research on the experience of performing queer sexuality in the metro-Atlanta area with self-identified queer adults (ages 21 – 31). This thesis focuses on the performative tensions between notions of selfhood and their associated aesthetics that are present in the lives of this study's participants. In performing sexual identity, these Atlantans create notions of queer sexuality which rely on what I call American essentialism – an ethnopsychological paradigm that sees individuals as possessing innate essences – and "weirdo habitus," an embodied disposition towards things considered strange. These framings allow for legible expression and legitimization of queer sexualities and can be understood as adaptations to the necropolitical realities of queer existence in the United States.

INDEX WORDS: Performativity, Queer, Sexuality, Atlanta, Selfhood, Habitus

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by

Michael-Anthony Claytor

Committee Chair: Jennifer Patico

Committee: Cassandra White

Faidra Papavasiliou

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

For everyone who debated my sexuality in high school. Glad I was so interesting. Thanks for the thesis.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

"Hey, I was hoping I could run my outfit for Friday by you." I say into the phone pressed against my left shoulder and ear. I'm pulling clothes from a pile on my bed, trying to find some combination that looks nice but not like I'm trying too hard and yet somehow comfortable. I have a default outfit that I wear when conducting participant observation, a plaid blue short-sleeve button up, cream-colored shorts, and grey adidas. This Friday requires something else. Athena has invited me to Second Friday, a traveling night club catered towards queer women that pops up in different locations around Atlanta on the second Friday of every month. Judging from the pictures I have seen on Athena's Instagram, I need to put in a little more effort.

"Sure." She says in a soft, quick way, her voice getting higher in the middle of the word. She seems distracted and I can hear the clamor of objects in the background.

"So, I wanted to do something different from Pride," I say referring to the bands of rainbows on black that I wore to 2023 Nashville Pride two months earlier. "I kinda want to balance things that seem very straight with things that seem very gay so–"

Athena interrupts, "You can dress how you want. I'm not gonna tell you what to wear, but it's probably not a good idea to look like a straight man in a club full of lesbians." It was less what she said and more how she said it that set me aback. Athena spoke in a slow almost casual way, like trying to tell a child who is playing too roughly with a toy that they are going to break it. It's the same tone I've heard professors use when pointing out an ethical quagmire in an advisee's research project or when delicately deconstructing a student's ethnocentrism in front of a packed lecture hall. Although her words are a suggestion, her tone is a warning.

Friday arrives and I am as unprepared as I was before the phone call. Athena's warning echoes in my mind and I am suddenly shocked by the "straightness" of my wardrobe, nothing

but monochrome-colored shirts, baggy jeans, unimaginative button-ups, and black hoodies. Six months ago, the assignment of sexuality to clothing would have made no sense to me. I was aware of stereotypes like the gay man in tight pink shorts, but the subtleties around dressing gay eluded me. Rings and boots, bright and dark colors, flannels and tank tops, masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and a general sense of weirdness all make up the complicated formula of aesthetic codes that are involved in "looking queer." It is in the midst of learning these complex performances that I find myself holding up clothes, pulling out rings, sifting through hats, findings old bracelets, and asking "too straight?"

In the end, I settle on loose fitting blue jeans and brown leather boots. I put on a plaid button-up short-sleeve shirt which I left open in the front. Underneath was a black t-shirt with a white image of the classic Renaissance Jesus covered in lose fitting robes. Across those robes, from his right shoulder to the left side of his waist was a rainbow sash and the words "Ah, men" written in alternating rainbow colors above his head. To balance the relative obviousness of this shirt, I paint my nails a dark black and decorate my fingers in rings, four on my right hand and three on my left. I take my black chain necklace with a small silver book-shaped locket out from under my shirt so it falls at the top of my sternum. Finally, I place two black bracelets on each on my wrists, the one on the left is made of thick black string with dark stones in the center; the one on my right is made of three leather strands. The top strand has small gold and silver rings in the center. If I buttoned the plaid shirt so the sacrilegious t-shirt was covered, I may look like something straight out of the 90s. Some 20-year-old who could not decide between the punk and emo scene. But to my participants, I would still look unmistakably gay.

Moments like these represent the organizing question behind this ethnographic work: what is the contemporary experience of performing sexuality for queer people (ages 21-35) in the

metro-Atlanta area? In defining performance, I employ the work of Judith Butler whose theory of performativity details how identities are created/maintained through everyday regulatory actions/discourses that proceed/shape subjects. I also take inspiration from the work of Eve Sedgewick, who defines queer performativity as the creation of meaning and being in the context of shame and stigma from a heterosexist society (Butler 2006, 34; Butler 1993, 24; Sedgewick 1993, 11). As such, this work not only documents the actions and discourses that index queer sexuality, but probes into how those actions and discourses craft sexuality categories and the subjects who embody them. When put into conversation with anthropological theories of self and emotion, what an investigation into the performance of queer sexuality reveals is the ethnopsychological bases upon which identities are made, felt, and legitimized.

Some other terms in my organizing question that require operationalization include "sexuality" and "queer." By sexuality, I refer to often essentialized notions of identity based on the patterns of one's sexual and romantic "desire" – a drive to form connection with others and for which sex and romance are possible tools for fulfillment[1] (O'Byrne and Holmes 2011, 3-4; Guattari and Deleuze, 1987). This definition is in line with the emic perspectives of my participants. If I were to ask a participant what their sexuality or sexual orientation is, they would respond with terms like "gay" or "lesbian." When asked what those terms mean, the answers are diverse but center around a desire to form connections with a particularly gendered person through romance or sex.

Sedgewick provides a useful definition of "queer" as any genders or sexualities which cannot be described monolithically (1993). Although I find this definition useful considering the shifting identity categories and aesthetic codes I describe in this thesis, my participants tend to

[1] More on sexuality in the chapter "Pressure, Pollution, and Performativity in Coming Out Narratives."

use the term differently as a shorthand that denotes a non-hetero/cisnormative identity. Rather than being a term that defines what someone is, queer is a term that defines what someone is not. Thus, a more inductive operationalization of queer, and the one I employ in this thesis, means non-heterosexual or cisgender identities which are often understood under the same ethnopsychological lens as heterosexual or cisgender identities. Taken together, I use "queer sexuality" to describe identity categories people leverage to describe their non-heterosexual (or not strictly heterosexual) patterns of sexual and romantic desire.

To investigate the experience of queer performativity, I conducted ethnographic research from April to September 2023. Over the course of my fieldwork the scope of this project shifted, requiring the expansion of several of my methods, all of which will be thoroughly discussed in the appropriately named chapter. Throughout that five-month period I conducted 13 formal semi-structured ethnographic interviews with 13 self-identified queer Atlantans. I also conducted several informal interviews over the course of my participant observation at clubs, pride events, drag shows, and social gatherings. My research is indebted to the friendship of a group of queer women whose insights and participation in this project was invaluable. It was through them and their invitations to a series of social events that I began to understand the performance of sexuality in ordinary moments and not just amidst the fluttering of pride flags and the glamor of drag pageants. Annie and Athena were of particular importance for this project, serving as key research participants and dear friends whose feedback, recommendations, and patient listening to my theoretical rantings provided validation, confidence, and guidance for my research. In essence, this project embodies the tried-and-true ethnographic promise that inquiry into social reality requires personal relationships (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 10-12).

At the end of my investigation, I came to see the experience of performing sexuality as characterized by tensions between seemingly asocial notions of selfhood and the very social ways that expressing that self is learned. In performing sexual identity, my participants create notions of queerness which rely on the ethnopsychological paradigm I call American essentialism and practices I understand as "weirdo habitus" for legitimacy and legibility in the context of heterosexist violence.

The following chapter reviews anthropological literature on self and emotion to describe American essentialism, my term for a dominant ethnopsychological paradigm that conceptualizes the self as individual, innate, unchanging, essentialized, and characterized by a "true" core that existents independent of society and from which emotions spring forth. I challenge the belief that this conceptualization of selfhood is universal to humanity and argue that its emergence is tied to the United States' particular political-economic history. Although this concept is related to ideas about individualism and liberal selfhood that exist beyond the borders of the United States and prior to the 21st century, I emphasize the *American* aspect of American essentialism to capture the particular forms of liberal and neoliberal selfhood I saw taking place among queer Atlantans in 2023. Furthermore, I trace the use of this paradigm in the deployment of sexuality and the more recent legitimization of queer identity.

The methods chapter centers around the transformation of my project from an investigation into "the closet" and "coming out" among same-gender-loving men to a broader investigation of queer performativity. Furthermore, I discuss my two main ethical quagmires: the presence and use of intoxicants at field sites and the access my positionality as a gay white man permitted. I further reflect on my positionality and the ways it has impacted my recruitment of participants, specifically along racial lines. I then provide an overview of the participants in this

study to humanize those whose lives, stories, backgrounds, and perspectives have shaped my understandings of queer performativity in Atlanta.

My ethnographic findings are divided into two chapters, "Pressure, Pollution, and Performativity in Coming Out Narratives" and "Weirdo Habitus." The first chapter focuses on a key moment of queer performativity, coming out, and the bungie-jumping like sensation that characterizes my participants' coming out narratives. Understanding these moments as a kind of pressure caused by the experience of autonomous pollution, I argue that the emotionality indexed in these narratives facilitates the folding of queer sexuality into American essentialism. The blending of queer sexuality and American essentialism through the latter's conceptualization of emotion contributes to ongoing efforts to legitimize queer sexuality in the United States. Furthermore, this process facilitates the shifting nature of participants' sexuality categories through the language of self-discovery. The next chapter delves into the process whereby my participants code others as queer through what I call weirdo habitus: the physical adornments, patterns of consumption, and hexis[2] that give off a queer "vibe." This chapter focuses on conceptualizations of queerness that are explicitly learned and the tensions it creates with American essentialism. It is this tension that I see as central to my participants' experiences with performing queer sexuality.

Finally, my conclusion focuses on analyzing how these performative tensions are adaptive to the necropolitical realities of being queer in the heterosexist United States. Although these adaptations are tied to extremely exploitive and deadly social realities, I argue that the lived experience of those adaptations cannot be summed up in purely net negative terms. Furthermore,

[2] The bodily expressions of habitus in the way one carries themselves, such as posture (Bourdieu 1984, 218).

this conclusion serves as an exercise in queer futurity by challenging scholars to utilize the past and the present when imagining less deadly futures.

# 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

> [T]he 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. (Butler 2006, 23)

An inquiry into queer sexuality's performativity requires the acknowledgment that identities and subjects, rather than being pre-existing metaphysical entities (28), are the complex products of their sociocultural contexts. To that extent, beginning my study on the performance of queer sexuality in Atlanta requires an investigation into the very discourses that create intelligible subjects and sexualities. By combining literature from across the social sciences and even popular queer fiction, I came to understand queer sexuality in the United States as part of a larger, historically particular American theory of selfhood where individuals are seen as possessing individual, innate, unchanging, and essentialized core aspects of self that exist independent of society and from which emotion spring forth. I call this regime of selfhood American essentialism to denote both the historical particularity of this regime and its emphasis on an internal and unique "essence" that defines each individual. Not to be confused with essentialist perspectives on social categories like race, class, or gender, American essentialism is meant to describe the idea of a "true self" that is sacrosanct to my participants. It is also important to note that although I describe a relatively well documented regime of selfhood, this is one out of many possible regimes or ideations and is not descriptive of how all subjects are shaped in the United States.

## 2.1 The Anthropology of Selfhood and American Essentialism

Selfhood and the different ways in which the self is defined, negotiated, and experienced across humanity is by no means a new field of study in anthropology. Ruth Benedict described investigations into cultural realities as "socio-psychological problems" that require attention to

the historical forces which have constructed them (Benedict 1959, xvi). Indeed, her notion of cultural particularism posits a direct relationship between the unique patterns of culture and the personality characteristics of its members (Honigmann 1961, 93). Margaret Mead, a student of Benedict, was one of the first anthropologists to provide ethnographic evidence that challenged psychologists' attempts to make universal theoretical claims about the self. Her work on adolescence in Samoa (2001a) and gender in Papua New Guinea (2001b) famously counters the popular belief that teenage angst and gender roles are universal phenomena rather than the product of the particular ways people are enculturated. The study of selfhood across humanity continued well into the 20th and 21st centuries and further bolstered the Boasians' claim that what constitutes the self is a historical particularity.

In her 1980s ethnography on Japanese concepts of self in a working-class Tokyo neighborhood, Dorinne Kondo provides a captivating account of her time at an ethics school. This school taught its students an idealized form of self which is seen as constantly shifting to the needs and desires of others. The school emphasized the need for every person to develop a *sunao na kokoro* (gentle heart) through acts that required deep investment with the outside world via intense top to bottom cleanings of the school, encouraging public expressions of painful emotions, and activities by which the success of the individual was dependent on the whole group (Kondo 1990 80, 100, 109). Together these exercises crafted students' senses of self that aligned with the desires of others. This notion of selfhood is not isolated to the school but also found in the lives of Kondo's neighbors, Japanese linguistic structures, and her own experience developing a sense of self in the field (16-17, 22, 26-27, 111-113). However, what makes the school all the more fascinating is how it fits within the larger historical context of Japan. In her work, Kondo traces the ethics school's founding and the associated "ethics movement" to

broader heterodoxic responses to the extensive socioeconomic changes that accompanied US occupation (78). The form of selfhood Kondo describes is, like other aspects of sociocultural existence, a product of historical particularity rather than a stable human universal.

Another fascinating case lies in Dale Pesmen's ethnography of early post-Soviet Russian concepts of *dusha* (soul). Like Kondo's findings regarding Japanese selfhood, Pesmen's participants in Omsk, Siberia describe *dusha* as constructed through others rather than being an individualized and unchanging core. Specifically, one's *dusha* is constructed through social activities like social drinking, gift giving, hosting social gatherings, and sharing food (Pesmen 2000, 150-153, 162-164, 171, 175-177). Like any other theory of self, *dusha* is also historically constructed which Pesmen brilliantly depicts in her description of Russian economic change during the 1990s. One develops their *dusha* is by participating in the *blat* economy, an "underground" system of mutually indebted social relationships facilitated by gift giving (135). The *blat* system itself was a response to the economic realities of the Soviet economy. To compensate for the shortages of needed goods, people in Omsk would steal from their workplace, stock up on momentarily cheap goods, and utilized their social connections to exchange items in a complicated web of gift giving that shunned explicit references to payment (132-136). Major shifts in the concept of *dusha* took place during the reforms of *perestroika* which saw the rise of the market economy during the 1990s. As the *blat* system relied on notions of gift giving and a refusal to define reciprocal exchange as payment, *perestroika's* emphasis on cash exchange was decried by Pesmen's participants as antithetical to the *blat* system and thus a threat to *dusha* itself (128-129, 139). What becomes clear in this interaction between *dusha* and systems of exchange is the ways that selfhood is linked to historical developments. What constitutes the self in a given social context is the product of active history rather than

unchanged, universal, static conceptualizations. If selfhood is a particularity, then any investigation into how identities are performed in a certain context requires an overview of selfhood within that context.

Dominant notions of selfhood in the United States can be defined by what I call American essentialism. Like selfhood in other social groups, American essentialism is a product of historical particularity. The self in the United States tends to be conceptualized as consisting of an individual, innate, unchanging, and essentialized core from which emotion and desires spring forth independent of society. It is this essential, individualized self that is believed to be the most sincere, legitimate version of a person (Lutz 1988, 53; Kondo 1990, 32). Like any other notion of selfhood, the development of American essentialism is tied to historical developments, most notably the shifting realities of wage labor and market capitalism. In his highly influential work, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the advent of industrialism as requiring a "new microphysics" of control over individuals to facilitate the control of populations. This microphysics includes the creation of docile bodies — bodies that are disciplined and become "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" in the interests of those in power (Foucault 1984, 130, 180-183; Foucault 1977). Part of this discipline required the transformation of individual people into "cases" whose adherence to desired norms is capable of evaluation and becomes representative of that person's "very individuality" (203). In this regime, the student does not simply fail a test but becomes a failure, the worker does not fail to meet quotas but is a lazy person, someone does not simply commit a crime but is a criminal. One's adherence or deviation from the norm becomes their totality either within or across different social contexts. Thus, American essentialism's emphasis on the individual is the product of a specific industrialized

labor history. But where does this notion of an innate, unchanging, essential core come from? And how does this relate to the legitimization of queer identity?

In his ethnographic study of sexuality in 1980s Dominica, Bill Maurer noted that only men in his study possessed sexualities — that is, an identity constructed around their patterns of desire— while women did not necessarily have similar identity terms (Maurer 2000, 98-99)[3]. In his use of Rosaldo's public/private dichotomy as an intellectual framework to parse out the emergence of sexuality, Maurer describes how in market capitalist and wage labor systems one's capacity to labor is considered central to being a person. Those living within this system feel compelled to alienate their innate capacity to labor for needed resources but are simultaneously unsettled by this. In response, a need arises to develop aspects of self that are inalienable, but as innate and unchanging as the ability to labor. Those aspects of selfhood that are considered inalienable become fundamental, the "true self" that is so quintessential in American ethnopsychology. However, this regime of selfhood was not necessarily a successful form of resistance. Although labor was no longer considered an innate essence, one's unique "true self" became something that shaped their ability to labor thus allowing people to sell their uniqueness in the public market[4] (106).

Contemporary neoliberalism also relies on conceptualizations of the self as being innate, unchanging, essentialized cores. Neoliberalism is loosely defined as a form of late-stage capitalism that emphasizes the perceived benefits of the free market, the decentralization of

[3] It is worth noting that Maurer makes some important disclaimers when it comes to his fieldwork. His young age of 19, his need to present himself as a serious researcher to older members of the community, his positionality as a white American man, and his association with an elderly woman who was seen as the "bastion of 'respectability' and Christian virtue" all impacted his ability to document and analyze the vocabularies of sexuality and work in Dominica (97).

[4] Furthermore, Maurer does not claim that women's labor is unalienated in Dominica. Rather because men in Dominica are more likely to participate in the wage labor economy, they are more likely to engage in this process of creating "true" inalienable selves that can sold on the market.

government, deregulation for private enterprise, and the privatization of public services, which often widens social inequalities (Steger 2010). Product and productive of these political-economic realities, neoliberalism relies on creating and disciplining an idealized subject that is individualized, autonomous, and self-directing in the pursuit of its desires (Clare 2017, 28; O'Neill and Weller 2016, 88). The ideal neoliberal subject is an "entrepreneur of oneself" and is defined by their capability to know and pursue their own individual interests based on their supposedly innate ability to make an income. This does not mean that the neoliberal subject exists in a landscape devoid of power, but rather that neoliberal power functions by disciplining individuals who know their "true" individual interests (Clare 2017, 26-28; Kiersey 2016, 168; Foucault 2008).

The idea of subjects who possess their own interests separate from the social world– or indeed, who pursues their own interests regardless of the social world– speaks to conceptualizations of selves as individual, innate, unchanging, essentialized cores from which those interests originate. Neoliberal governance relies on creating essentialized subjects and directing them in useful ways by shaping the environment in which they achieve their individualized desires (28). Furthermore, having the correct desires is not necessarily as important as achieving those desires within the available landscape. Take the low-income high school student who wants to enroll in a prestigious university as an example. The fact that the student wants to attend the prestigious university is not problematic, nor is any major and associated career they may desire, so long as those desires represent their "true self." By controlling the environment in which this student enrolls in that university, they still prove useful to the state and private enterprise – the very actors who institutionalize neoliberalism. In pursuing their true interest, the student may enroll in the military to obtain educational support,

they may work an unpaid internship to pad their application, or they may take a private educational loan from a bank to cover what federal student aid will not. In this context, the state gets its soldier, the corporation its unpaid labor, and the bank a new source of revenue. As such, neoliberal selfhood's emphasis on an essentialized subject is an arguably more efficient form of exploitation as instead of forcing the student into these roles explicitly, the student "freely" seeks out these forms of exploitation and "freely" gives their labor. Thus, American essentialism's emphasis on individual, innate, unchanging selves is the product of the United States' economic history and contemporary regimes of power. Studies of emotion and social relationships in the United States provide further evidence for the existence of this regime of self.

American essentialism views emotions as springing from the individual, innate, unchanging core. In her ethnography on class differences around the concepts of individualism in New York City, Adrie Kusserow describes how emotions are seen as representations of a child's essential self across class lines. In the working-class Kelly and Queenston neighborhoods, parents often cited their child's emotions as being characteristic of their child's essence. Crying, affection, or timidness are seen as signs of an internal "softness" whilst feeling confident and assertive are indicative of an internal "toughness" (Kusserow 2004, 36-37). For these working-class parents, a child's emotions may indicate an internal core that exists on a gradient from soft to tough but regardless of where the child exists on that scale, the goal of parenting is to "toughen" the child and prepare them for the realities of high-stress, explicitly hierarchical, blue-collar jobs and the "dangerous neighborhoods" they will live in (35-36, 50). This is not seen as necessarily changing the child but providing them with an "architecture" that will protect the innate self from the external, pollutive forces of the social world (40). Parents in the affluent Parkside neighborhood also conceptualize emotions as expressions of the child's core identity

that need to be protected from external, pollutive, social forces. However, unlike their Kelly and Queenston counterparts, there is no emphasis on toughening up the self. Instead, the expression of a child's emotion is seen as essential for the "opening up" of the child' unique identity, making emotional expression a process of self-discovery that should be protected, respected, and fostered (88). This idea of opening up a unique identity through emotional expression is adaptive to the white-collar jobs Parkside parents expect from their children such as banking, consulting, and entrepreneurship, all economic sectors where marking oneself as completely unique is essential for competition (80-83). Regardless of these differences, American essentialism conceptualizes emotion as stemming from an innate, individual core, a view of selfhood that is useful for the realities of neoliberal capitalism. What is even more fascinating about Kusserow's examples is the way parents in the Queenston, Kelly, and Parkside neighborhoods all view the world surrounding the child as potentially damaging to the development of a "true" self. Indeed, understanding the social world as pollutive to an essentialized self is another defining aspect of American essentialism. Whether through Maurer's perspective of needing an inalienable aspect of self or the notion of the good self-directed neoliberal subject, American essentialism emphasizes a self that is separate from and defended against the world around it. This is most apparent in American depictions of "pure" relationships.

In their studies of relationships in Western modernity, Anthony Giddens (1991) and James Carrier (1999) describe ideal relationships as being independent of pre-existing social and economic obligations. Instead, the ideal relationship requires a level of spontaneity; two people can only become close suddenly when their ability to detect the good in one another is mutually, but independently, triggered (Giddens 1991, 80; Carrier 1999, 25). In this regime, relationships are maintained only if they ensure mutual yet independent emotional benefits. Any other reason

for the continuation of a relationship — such as social obligation, economic dependence, or moral imperative — is seen as insincere and can create dissatisfaction (Giddens 1991, 89-91). Julienne Obadia presents a similar phenomenon in her study of polyamory contracts in the United States. In her work, Obadia provides excerpts from "contracts" formed between two individuals who enter a romantic, sexual, and non-monogamous relationship. These contracts emphasize that the relationship a couple is entering is made independent of external forces and based purely on individual emotions and desires. These contracts place an emphasis on individual happiness independent of the partner and any obligation to them. Love and affection between two people are understood to be possible only when all parties in a relationship are completely autonomous and able to separate their emotions and desires from those of others (Obadia 2022, 514). Each of these examples depict emotions — which as Kusserow describes, are the manifestation of the essentialized self — as ideally independent of any social actor, context, or phenomenon. However, this pattern does reveal an interesting tension as the supposedly completely autonomous subject has their contingent emotions triggered by another. As will be teased out throughout this thesis, the essential self and its appropriate modes of expression are socially realized.

Under American essentialism, any imposition on the self is seen as undesirable and perhaps even pathological. Nowhere else is this more prevalent than in the American obsession with "co-dependence" and the coveted psychotherapist who is meant to promote their client's autonomous, individualized, and self-directing neoliberal and thus essentialized self. Even the influential framework of ego psychology defined itself by emphasizing the transformation of patients into self-directing, individualized, goal-pursuing neoliberal subjects (Clare 2017, 29-30; Bondi 2005). By contrast, scholarship that understands emotion as a type of cultural construction

takes seriously the role of social forces in the creation of individuals and has called into question the ethnocentric assumptions of psychology on which these obsessions are based. These range from an analysis of the everyday ways collective affects are experienced (Stewart 2007), the embodied nature of precarity (Gaur and Patnaik 2011), the influence of culture on the manifestation of psychosis (Luhrmann and Marrow 2016), and the public nature of depression, anxiety, and suicide (Allison 2012; Cvetkovich 2012; Williams 2017). Collectively, this body of knowledge infers that the pathologization of individuals on the bases of concepts like codependency, or even the therapeutic notion of self-actualization, are disciplines meant to maintain individual manifestations of American essentialism throughout the United States.

In the United States, the self (and its contingent emotions) are seen as originating from an individual, innate, unchanging, essentialized core that is believed to be the most sincere, legitimate version of a person. Any external influence on this innate self is a hindrance to "correct" development and must be protected against. Like *sunao na kokoro* in Japan or *dusha* in Russia, this notion of selfhood is a historical particularity and not a human universal. It is worth mentioning that although American essentialism is the product of historical particularity, the historical forces in question are not necessarily exclusive to the United States. As seen through the global spread of practices like self-branding, essentialist discourses of self are a kind of ideoscape that follows the lines of global capitalism to people living far beyond the borders of the United States and my field site (Gershon 2016, 224-225; Appadurai 1990). However, my use of the term *American* essentialism is meant to narrow in on how these discourses are manifested within the lives of my American participants living in an American city. Furthermore, the term is meant to discourage the immediate application of what I have discussed above to other parts of the world. Although the forces of colonization and globalization have certainly created global

similarities in conceptions of self, attention must be paid to the idiosyncrasies of how those global forces are locally manifested. The idea of an authentic, essential, unchanging self may be present in *contemporary* Dominica, Omsk, and Atlanta, but that does not mean that the experience of developing this idealized self, its history within those cities and their broader states, or the ways it shapes sexual lives are the same in all three contexts. Next, I turn to the intersections between American essentialism and queer sexualities in the United States.

## 2.2 American Essentialism and the Making of Sexuality

In the United States, who one sexually or romantically desires is intertwined with American essentialism. In his four-volume treatise, *The History of Sexuality,* Foucault describes a shift in conceptualizations of sex from good or bad practices to good or bad identities (that is, sexualities) which stemmed from a need to manage populations, labor capacity, and social relations by controlling individuals (1990, 37). Foucault claims that this creation of sexuality was primarily carried out through four specific strategies: the hysterization of women's bodies, the pedagogization of children's' sex, the psychiatrization of perverse pleasure, and the socialization of procreative behavior (104-105). Through these strategies, procreative behavior (that is, penile-vaginal intercourse without the use of contraceptives) became a social good to be limited or reinvigorated by the state and medical institutions. Those who engaged in these "appropriate" behaviors were given the identity category of "heterosexual" and considered the "natural" subject. Similarly, all other forms of non-reproductive sex needed to be identified and controlled. It was no longer useful to simply describe a large mess of diverse sexual practices such as incest, oral sex, or adultery under large umbrella terms such as sodomy (38, 43). Individuals who engaged in non-procreative behavior needed to become cases capable of taxonomization. Hence

the birth of "the homosexual" as a "personage… a case history… with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (43).

This transformation of act into actor is evident in the birth of the "sodomite." In his reconstruction of regimes of desire and self before "homosexuality" in the United States, Ned Katz describes one of the earliest cases of public attacks on "sodomites" by a gossip paper called *The Whip*. What is fascinating about *The Whip*'s hateful condemnation is not that it shamed supposedly wrong kinds of sex but wrong kinds of people. Based on supposed shared actions, these men were assigned a common spoiled identity that possessed a "soul" which "differed substantially from the soul of ordinary men – an early version of the idea that sodomites possessed a distinct sort of psyche" (Katz 2001, 45-46).

Like the notions of selfhood described above, these understandings about the meaning of sexual desires are not universal to humanity. Indeed, there exists an abundance of literature on how human beings organize desire that differs from the speciating process described by Foucault. In her work tackling essentialist assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality, Anne Fausto-Sterling describes studies of human desire where what defines appropriate sexual expression is more about social position rather than types of persons (2000, 16-20). Likewise, Guillermo Núñez Noriega (2014) and Judith Gay (1986) discuss the possibilities for same sex intimacy in Northern Mexico and Lesotho, respectively, that do not necessarily violate gender norms or result in a differentiated identity category. Stephen Garton discusses patterns in Greco-Roman sexual politics where male citizens had few restrictions on the number or types of sexual partners they were permitted so long as they maintained a position of dominance in all sexual interactions (Garton 2004, 35). Similarly, John Boswell (1995) analyzes the possibilities for same sex romantic unions in pre-industrial western Europe that precedes the birth of the

heterosexual or homosexual as identity categories. Finally, the anthropological shift away from ethnocartography – that is, "looking for evidence of same-sex sexuality and gender ambiguity in 'other societies'" – to critical investigations of the embodied histories and cultural configurations that shape subjects further represents the idea that even extremely naturalized ideations of selfhood are products of historical particularity (Weston 1993, 341; Boellstorff 2007).

Like the creation of "cases" that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, by associating "deviant" behavior and desire with the totality of an individual, an identity was created that enabled the study and control of that behavior and its actor. As such, this speciating pattern fits well within American essentialism where actions, such as emoting, are considered representative of the innate, unchanging core. Just as the student who failed a test is a failed student, so too is a man who has sex with other men a "homosexual" which in this case denotes failed personhood. Thus, the legacy and ongoing reality of capitalist labor has created a social world where one does not simply have sex, they express an internal and inherent sexual identity which rests within American essentialism (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 9).

Although sexuality was associated with an individual's essence, that essence can be considered in need of correction. The whole point of creating sexualities, of making personages out of actions, was to identify, understand, and control individuals assigned to those sexualities. Notions of selfhood are not simply descriptors of what human beings *can* be but what human beings *should* be thus making them power-laden concepts. This is made adamantly clear by the role of heteronormativity in American psychology. The United States is continuously described in academia as heteronormative: made up of social institutions, practices, and language that takes for granted universal heterosexual desire (Maltered and Bjorkman 2016, 1339). Indeed, the whole notion of "coming out," of revealing a non-heterosexual identity to others, as an almost

universal rite in American queer lives necessitates the reality that everyone is assumed to be heterosexual.

Nowhere else was the power of heteronormativity more potent than in the early days of social and behavioral science whose goals included, among other things, the continued socialization of procreative behavior and the pathologization of "homosexuals." In their analysis of the history of psychological theory regarding sexuality, Beard and Glickauf-Hughes discuss Freud's belief that homosexuality was the result of a subject's failure to move past autoeroticism and become other-directed, thus making homosexuality a kind of narcissism (1994, 23). They then discuss Melanie Klein who believed that homosexuality among men was the result of male infants becoming fearful of their mothers' bodies when they discovered she lacked a penis. This fear resulted in the infant's inability to accept her body in gratifying terms. Furthermore, Klein believed that if the mother fails to meet the needs of the infant, the child's rage towards the mother can transform into a general revolution against women (23-24). Socarides claimed that homosexuality was the result of fathers failing to provide the child with the necessary introduction into the social world and the mother's failure to allow the child to explore and discover (25).

Regardless of the interpretation, homosexuality was seen as a failure in the normal psychological development that should lead to a heterosexuality, a kind of corruption originating outside the individual and distorting the supposedly "true" (heterosexual) self. As a result, those who were caught or accused of same-sex desire risked being pathologized by doctors, psychologists, politicians, religious officials, and the like as "corrupted" entities who represented some sort of calamity to the supposed natural order. Even early sexological theories that framed homosexuality as a potential "third sex," something that could have led to homosexual

legitimacy, still considered the category a pathology and focused on developing diagnostical criteria for its identification (Valentine 2007, 40-42). Furthermore, those individuals were considered in need of corrective institutions like asylums or conversion therapies to restore the "true" heterosexual self.[5] In summation, heterosexuality was considered part of the universal essential self while any sort of deviation, including homosexuality, was considered an external corruption.

If industrial capitalism created American essentialism and sexuality, and essentialism was a key part of the pathologization of non-heterosexuality, how is it that people who identify with terms like homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, etc. came to legitimize their existence? The question is the answer: American essentialism legitimizes queer sexuality. In 1980, at the cusp of Reaganist and Thatcherite neoliberalism, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) drafted its third version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III). In it, they removed homosexuality as a mental disorder only because of an analytical shift to pathologize what could be seen publicly rather than inferred privately (Wilson 1993, 408). Essentially, homosexuality was depathologized in psychology only because it was considered something intimate, internal, and private — a conceptualization that was the purposeful work of gay activists (Valentine 2007, 55). Over time, gay rights movements challenged the idea of heterosexuality as a universal essence and sought to transform the heteronormative discursive regime. To these advocates, sexuality in general was an essence of self rather than just heterosexuality and one that could take on a multitude of forms between or beyond the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

[5] It is worth noting that although these theories sound as if they are from a bygone era, homosexuality was only repealed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980, Lawrence v Texas was decided in 2003, and conversion therapy is still legal in 29 US states (National Board of Certified Counselors, 2020).

This was not a new tradition that burst forth suddenly from the Stonewall riots, but an old argument that developed alongside the deployment of sexuality. Karl Ulrich took the claim that homosexuality was the product of an inversions of the sexes to legitimize its existence as early as the 1860s, right when "the homosexual" began to be codified into laws. Other activists such as Adolf Brand, André Gide, and the post-World War II Manhattan Society rejected the notion of sex perversion in an attempt to normalize homosexuality (41-42). By the 1920s and 1930s some academics began developing theories about homosexuality that considered it an essential, inherent aspect of a person's supposed true nature" (D'Emilio 1983, 105). Eventually, this popular and academic emphasis would move past just homosexuality to include queer identities of all kinds. In some cases, this transformation of essential sexual identity being strictly heterosexual to being any of several sexualities was applied to nomothetic theories about humanity in an attempt to discover queer history.[6] Furthermore, several popular works of queer fiction take a similar approach in creating worlds where queer stigma is lessened or non-existent, but sexual desire is still seen as innate, unchanging, and internal aspect of self even without an associated identity term.[7] These works, although destigmatizing non-heterosexual identity, do little to challenge the creation of sexuality. Instead, they portray sexuality as unchanging, innate, and essential across human existence, a kind of meta-essentialism where any view of sexual desire is always an aspect of identity and a clearly demarcated category of existence that comes from an internal place. As such, even in less explicitly heterosexist environments, sexuality and

[6] Examples include the use of "homosexual" in the analysis of societies where the term never existed (Bosewell 1981; Herdt 1981; Richlin 1993) and collections of "homosexual" poems and love letters spanning thousands of years of history, well before the Western codification of sexual acts into identity brought on by industrialization (Coote, 1986; Norton 1998; Avery, 2023).

[7] Examples include *In the Lives of Puppets* (Klune 2023), *To Paradise* (Yanagihara, 2022), and *The Song of Achilles* (Miller 2011).

American essentialism have an interconnected relationship. This will be more thoroughly discussed in the chapter “Pressure, Pollution, and Performativity in Coming Out Narratives.”

## 2.3 Conclusion

Both queer and straight sexuality in the United States rests on the historically particular ethnopsychological theory of American essentialism which defines individuals as having an individual, innate, unchanging, “true” core aspect of self that catalyzes emotion. What I hope I have accomplished in this literature review is a queering of the ideas of desire and selfhood that are so commonplace in the United States and in the lives of my participants, a kind of denaturalization of the norm. Only by placing these deeply held notions in their historical and political-economic contexts can the statements and actions of my participants be seen as meaningful moments of resistance, belonging, and meaning making that not only index queer sexuality but produce it.

# 3 METHODS

In many ways this ethnographic project does not have a clear start date. What started out as a research question designed to expand on a previous ethnographic project was transformed both in recruitment parameters and in theoretical orientation. In the fall of 2021, I conducted a virtual ethnography on the social media site TikTok (Claytor 2021). My focus was on an aggregation of profiles, users, and videos created by and for non-heterosexual men to discuss their experiences with "the closet," a state of being where one purposefully obscures their non-heterosexual/cisgender identity from others. That project sparked a fascination with identity construction, performance, stigma, and experiential health that I sought to carry into my master's thesis. Driven to test my ethnographic skills outside of the virtual realm, I devised a research project to investigate the nuanced experiences of the closet for queer men, ages 18-25, living in the metro-Atlanta area. My hope was that by understanding the closet's nuance and how it may be used as armor, I could better understand the logic behind the stigmatization of queer people. However, the flexible ethnographic methods I employed for this project— namely semi/unstructured interviewing and participant observation — ended up revealing that my initial question was not representative of my participants' experiences. As such, I altered my research question to focus on the experiences of performing queer sexuality. This pivot still encapsulates the "coming out" phenomena as it represents one of the first purposeful moments of marking oneself as queer, but it also goes beyond the closet to include the everyday ways that sexuality is indexed and created. Although I am quite proud of my successful methodological pivoting, my investigation was not without challenges as I faced ethical concerns surrounding the presence of intoxicants at my field sites and internal conflicts over the level of access I was permitted during my research.

## 3.1 A Project Transformed

### *3.1.1 The Initial Research Design*

My initial Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved project was quite different from the one I ended up completing. At the time of my project's approval, I wanted to focus on how non-heterosexual men between the ages of 18-25 living in the metro-Atlanta area were experiencing the closet. My choice of age and gender was due in part to the sheer amount of scholarship geared toward queer men under 30, but also because my shared age, gender, and sexuality would help in facilitating rapport. Furthermore, part of me hoped to discover something about my own experience with the closet and the insecurities I felt as a recently "out" gay man. My choice in the metro-Atlanta area as a field site was partly out of convenience. As a full-time graduate student and corporate employee, I found any prospect of travel to conduct a long-term ethnographic study impractical. This is not to say there were no analytical reasons for choosing Atlanta. Atlanta recently scored a perfect 100 in the Human Rights Campaign Municipal Equality Index, a measure of how well a city's government "embodies LGBTQ+ inclusion [in] their laws, policies, and services" (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). Inspired by Savannah Shange's concept of "progressive dystopia," I wanted to focus on Atlanta to understand how the perceived acceptance of queer identity, as indicated by the high Equality Index score, impacts the more nuanced experiences of the closet for men who love men (Shange 2019, 11). Furthermore, such a score reflects the perceptions many Atlantans have of their city as a relatively safe and inclusive bubble when compared to a seemingly unsafe conservative state. As such, I thought the potential for probing into the nuances and potential contradictions of this supposed microcosmic safe zone added to Atlanta's significance as a field site.

Although I was happy with my choice of "metro-Atlanta" as a field site, there is plenty of debate over what constitutes the metro-Atlanta area. Local claims vary from the metaphorical boundary of Highway 285 to small rural towns that are halfway to Macon. Ultimately, I decided on this simple premise: if I could get to where a potential participant lived via any of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transportation Authority's (MARTA) services, they qualified as living in the metro-Atlanta area.

My initial recruitment methods for this project were threefold: support groups, classes at Georgia State University's (GSU) Department of Anthropology, and my already existing social networks. Inspired by Moshe Shokeid's study of a support group for elderly gay men in New York (2001), I reached out to several organizations that provide services to queer men in the Atlanta area hoping that they would put me in contact with people who are used to discussing and theorizing about their sexuality and the closet. I ended up recruiting no participants through this method. I suspect part of the reason was my inability to provide compensation. Atlanta is a hub for public health research which tends to provide financial incentives to its participants. As such, the people these organizations served and connected to researchers were used to a form of reciprocity that I could not provide.

My second method involved reaching out to professors in GSU's Department of Anthropology and asking them to circulate information about my project via a virtual flier. I ended up recruiting across three summer classes which yielded one participant. By the time I had more professors agree to circulate the flier during the fall semester, I had already met a large group of participants through my third method and was beginning to wrap up my project.

My already active social networks turned out to be the main way I recruited participants. Although I did meet two men who agreed to be interviewed during my time conducting

participant observation at a local gay bar known as Bear, I was put in contact with most of my participants through mutual friends. For instance, several of my interviewees are members of a friend group of queer women that I refer to as the Nashville Group. I met the Nashville Group after Athena invited me to travel with them to Nashville Pride (hence the name) and their stories have become some of the most illuminating in my research. In fact, that Nashville trip became the primary catalyst for my project's transformation from investigating the closet to investigating performativity.

I was quite unsettled when I arrived with Athena and Florence to the AirBnB the Nashville Group was sharing for the weekend. Most of these women knew each other from attending Second Friday, a traveling bar oriented towards queer women that pops up at a new location in Atlanta on the second Friday of each month. When I entered the AirBnB, I entered as the only man and a complete stranger to most. Trying to calm myself before a long day of observation ahead of me, I sat at the dining room table and began writing about the AirBnb in a notebook I had brought with me. I had agreed to attend Nashville Pride in the interest of documenting comparative observations about how people expressed their sexuality in supposedly "out" and safe spaces in Nashville compared to Atlanta. Suddenly, Olivia appeared beside me and asked what I was doing. I explained my thesis and how I was taking notes about my settings as a warm-up to the actual event. Eventually we started talking about her experiences marking herself as gay via material culture and flirting with women. What I did not expect was that most of the group would eventually join us at the table, all weighing in on the issues of dating, stigma, and knowing when someone else is gay. Frazzled and writing quickly, I asked if I could take out my phone and record. We were only interrupted by the leader of the group, Sasha, telling us we needed to take a group photo before heading out. I stayed at the table for a beat, saving my

recording and wondering how fast I could submit an addendum to my IRB. This group interview convinced me to change my project not because it necessarily brought me new information, but because the stories of these women were in remarkable alignment with those I already collected from men through semi/unstructured interviewing and participant observation. In the summer heat of Nashville, I realized my initial question and recruitment parameters were too presumptive and needed expansion.

### *3.1.2 Interviews*

At the time of my arrival in Nashville, I had conducted three semi-structured interviews with two gay men and one trans woman who expressed interest in participating in my study. I purposefully chose semi-structured interviews because I wanted my dominant assumptions, whatever they were, to be challenged by those I interviewed. Characterized by a guide that facilitates a directed conversation while allowing interviewees to discuss topics important to them, these interviews corrected my priori assumptions about the closet (Bernard 2018, 164-165). The paradigm of my research question rested on the idea that the closet was a flexible state of being, able to be put on and taken off like a suit of armor. Although several questions in my guide were dedicated to this idea, my participants were always quick to correct me. For them, the closet was not a piece of armor that one put on or took off, instead coming out was a ritual that happened between themselves and key people in their lives. But once that ritual was complete that was it, they were out. There may be moments where they tailor how they express their sexuality to alleviate safety concerns but that was something they described as omission rather than going back in the closet. All interviews lasted about an hour and a half to two hours and were either conducted in person or virtually depending on the preference of the interviewee. At

the beginning of each interview, I reviewed an IRB approved consent form with the interviewee and gave them a copy via email or text.

I also conducted several unstructured interviews at Bear or with people who would later become my key participants. Unstructured interviews are much more conversational in nature. Because their flow is defined by the interviewer drawing out themes that interviewees bring up themselves, they are considered one of the best ways to learn about someone's lived experience (165). Every interviewee was told about my research project and gave me permission to record our conversation in my field notes. These unstructured interviews often focused on how one can tell when someone else is gay/lesbian/queer/etc. or how they were marking themselves as such. I found this domain of conversation to be extremely nuanced and filled with information about the experience of performing queer identity. Taken together, employing these interview methods brought my attention to the shortcomings in my understanding of the closet and re-directed my attention towards queer performativity.

### *3.1.3 Participant Observation*

A key method of mine was conducting participant observation at discursively marked queer places. Participant observation is characterized by an attempt to experience the realities of the people one studies with. It involves an emphasis on studying the daily lives of people and learning how to fit into those lives and the spaces where they take place. It requires watching, listening, experiencing, and asking questions of those one participates with. (Bernard 2018, 274; Carrier-Moisan, Flynn, and Santos 2020, 130; Alexander-Nathani 2021, 102). Its emphasis on lived experience makes participant observation a highly flexible method, encouraging one to sit in several contexts and weave together the ways a group of people understand the world by using the researcher's innate human ability to enculturate. My interviews had already challenged my

presumptions about the closet and started to direct me towards performativity, but it was by observing how people express their sexuality and the symbols associated with queer life that I not only witnessed how others performed their sexuality but learned how to express sexuality myself.[8] These observations and embodied lessons caused me to reconsider my recruitment parameters.

Initially the crux of my participant observation included the popular Midtown Atlanta gay bar, Bear. I chose Bear because of its 30 years of existence and its location within the notoriously gay Midtown area. I visited the club once a month for five months. I arrived on whatever Saturday matched my schedule and observed from 11 PM to 12:30-1:00 AM as this was when the club was busiest. I felt that attending during these busy periods would provide me with more people and interactions to observe than any other time. Acknowledging the limitations of observing only one place at one specific time, I began to look for more events to observe. To find opportunities for observation I would Google "Gay events in Atlanta" and be greeted with several events catering to several queer identities. I attended those I could including drag shows, open mic nights, and beauty pageants. In these events, I paid attention to how people expressed their sexuality through things like bodily adornments, speech patterns, body language, use of space, physical contact, etc.

What I did not expect but should have predicted was how I began to embody the very forms of expression I was studying. I began to look at forms of material culture as "gay" and purposefully consume them. This included listening to certain artists, dressing in certain ways, painting my nails, using certain slang, and learning to feel the "vibe" of someone else to tell if they identified as queer. Although I possessed some of these skills before my project, many were

[8] Attention to how people expressed their sexuality and the symbols associated with queer life served as my observation protocol for all instances of participant observation.

new, and the existing ones seemed to intensify. Furthermore, I learned the important role "weirdness" played in the practice of marking oneself as queer (more on this in Chapter 6, "Weirdo Habtius"). Over the course of my short career studying the intersections of sexuality and stigma, I had read several studies on the everyday ways queer people were marked as "other" and their need to obscure sexual or romantic desires (Harper et al. 2016, 360; Cavalcante 2019, 1717; Caliskan 2021, 1450; Etengoff and Daiute 2015, 278; Wang, Rendina, and Pachankis 2016, 363). I never expected that a kind of joyous self-othering could be such an intrinsic part of marking oneself as queer across gender categories.

Returning to Nashville, I was shocked to see similar themes from my interviews and participant observations in the loud, chaotic conversations of my temporary roommates. They discussed the nuances not of the closet, but of marking oneself and others as queer through weirdness. Part of the reason I initially chose to focus on men was because of my assumption that performing queerness would vary wildly between queer people of different gender identities. Admittedly, the assumption was not unfounded as the hyper specialization of scholarship often insinuates such difference. Although the Nashville Group was discussing aspects of performing sexuality that was certainly unique to their experience as women, such as their hyper-sexualization by straight men, they also expressed similar experiences to the men I had already talked to such as the use of weirdness, frustrations with being marked as pollutive, and the use of American essentialism in discussing queerness. As such, I found that my understanding of queer sexuality was enhanced when I opened up my recruitment parameters to any individual who identified as queer rather than simply focusing on men.

The ethnographic methods of semi/un-structured interviewing and participant observation overturned my presumptions that the closet was a kind of armor for my participants and that a

study of queer sexuality required a hyper fixation on one gendered perspective. To overturn the presumptions that characterized my research question and recruitment parameters, I decided to submit a formal IRB addendum. Starting in July 2023, I focused my ethnographic investigation on understanding the experience of performing sexuality in the metro-Atlanta area. Beyond altering my research question, I also expanded my recruitment parameters to include people of any gender between the ages of 18-50 who identify queer.[9] In the end, I interviewed 13 people between 21-31 years of age[10]. Furthermore, the focus of my participant observation shifted from monthly observations at Bear and sporadically attending queer events to "hanging out" with the Nashville Group at parties, game nights, picnics, etc. In summation, the deployment of flexible ethnographic methods like semi/unstructured interviewing and participant observation were not only appropriate for studying the experience of performing queer sexuality, it was productive of the research question itself.

## 3.2 On Alcohol, Drugs, and Being a White Gay Man

### *3.2.1 My Two Rules*

The presence of intoxicants at my field sites was a major ethical problem during my research that required me to develop two rules: no more than two drinks and no recording. Almost every instance of participant observation I conducted included either alcohol, marijuana,

[9] I did not alter my interview guide as I found that discussing the closet and coming out proved to be a helpful catalyst for understanding how sexuality is performed, detected, understood, legitimized, and stigmatized. Furthermore, I did not change my observation protocols as they were already aligned with this new research question. The expansion of my age range was more of a precaution. I had one interesting interaction with a gay couple who were in their late 40s at *Bear* right before I submitted my addendum to the IRB. Because of that interaction, I decided to expand my parameters to include this older demographic but an opportunity to do so never manifested.

[10] My goal was to interview 12 participants due to findings that suggest data saturation is possible with as few as six to 12 interviewees depending on the level of homogeneity in the sample (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006, 73, 76). Some scholars even indicate a range of five to 25 interviewees for a phenomenological study such as this (Creswell in Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006, 61). Regardless, I believe my sample of 13 participants who all live in the same city, share a similar age, and express similar experiences with stigma is enough to at least parse out meta-themes relevant to understanding the lived, nuanced ways sexuality is performed in this particular cultural setting.

MDMA (ecstasy or "E"), hallucinogenic mushrooms, or some combination thereof. In many cases, participation in these events requires substance use to fully understand how they are experienced. For instance, I found that enjoying clubs like Bear required three ingredients: alcohol, friends, and music that one enjoys. Lacking these three things can make the club scene painfully awkward. Although the use of substances was a requisite to understanding these events, I still needed to be sober enough to observe what was happening around me. As such, I allowed myself to drink alcohol in moderation. Hence the creation of my first rule: no more than two drinks to allow for a light buzz.[11] This allowed me to experience these events in a more in-depth way than I could sober but ensured I was still lucid enough to observe, recount, and intellectualize the experience. Out of concerns for safety and a lack of prior experience with these substances, I did not permit myself to smoke marijuana, take MDMA, or consume hallucinogenic mushrooms.

My own use of substances was not my only ethical anxiety; I was also concerned about the level of intoxication of those I observed. Many scholars, myself included, would not consider an intoxicated person as capable of providing informed consent. In most cases, I ameliorated my fear of observing intoxicated strangers with the fact that I would not be collecting any revealing information and that they were in a public space. The most I would ever do is describe someone I observed or briefly talked to in my notes. Most of the time, their behaviors would be indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd. In cases where I attended an event with a group of participants, I made sure they knew I was taking notes over the course of the night *before* they started ingesting intoxicants. Eventually, those I spent time with became used to my note taking

[11] As a methodological note for anyone looking to conduct participant observation at gay clubs or events, I should warn that drinks at gay clubs are very strong. Repeatedly I watched different bartenders create a Vodka-Sprite with 50%-60% vodka.

and would even poke fun of me when I would quickly write something down in my notebook or type something in a notes application on my phone.[12] Regardless, I told them to let me know if there was anything they said or did that they wanted me to forget and delete from my notes. Furthermore, I used pseudonyms in my field notes to reduce the chance of participant identification in the unlikely event of a data breach.

None of these precautions were necessarily unique, in fact the refusal to collect identifiable information was mandated by the IRB. However, I had to consider how to ethically navigate conversations with people that were not exceedingly intoxicated nor fully sober. The answer was not as simple as omitting any observations or avoiding any conversations with a person as soon as they took a sip of alcohol. These were social events where substance use was the norm. To avoid interactions with others would defeat the purpose of participant observation. Omitting any observations or conversations I had with people on the spectrum of intoxication from my notes would be to deny the fact that these observations and conversations not only happened but influenced my thinking. Instead, I created my second rule: I would take no audio recordings and create no transcripts of any conversations I had with anyone who may be intoxicated. Instead, our interactions would only be captured via my field notes to reduce the chances of participant identification. Furthermore, I would tell anyone I talked to beyond passive small talk that I was a graduate student affiliated with Georgia State University, that I was actively conducting research, and that our conversations may be documented in my field notes.

[12] I found that using a notes application on my cellphone was infinitely preferable to a notebook and pen. This was not simply a matter of convenience but a methodological consideration that accounts for 1) Jeffery Cohen's call for participant observers to think about the roles they play as social actors in the settings they observe and 2) Tony Adam's depiction of the heightened anxieties gay spaces face in the post-Pulse Nightclub Shooting era (Cohen 2015, 321) (Adams 2017, 338). The presence of a notebook and pen might be anxiety-inducing for a population whose spaces have a history of criminal investigation and police raiding. Utilizing a phone allows an observer to capture jot notes while appearing to be texting, thus reducing the chances of creating fear or standing out.

These rules — no more than two drinks and no recording — helped guide my actions when conducting participant observation in spaces where intoxication was the norm. I by no means claim that these rules were perfect, and I welcome any critique of my actions as it can only develop new ethical paradigms for studying sociocultural behavior in the presence of intoxicants.

### *3.2.2 "It's cause you're gay:" Complicated Feelings Around Access*

My positionality as a white-Latino gay man greatly impacted the kinds access I was given into the lives of my participants. Firstly, being a white person directly affected the kinds of queer spaces I could access. The events I attended were overwhelmingly white, although this was not a purposeful choice on my part. Any time I visited Bear I saw well over 150 white men and no more than eight Black people, women included.[13] I rarely saw members of any other racialized group. The drag shows I attended were also predominantly white. Even the Nashville Group was mostly white. These overwhelmingly white spaces were indicative of the racial segregation present in Atlanta's queer scene, something noted by one of my participants (Fitz) and validated by *The Guardian* in a 2018 news article (Mahdawi 2018). As a white man, I was able to blend into these racialized spaces with ease. Fitz did bring my attention to events that seemed geared towards Black gay men, and I did visit the Atlanta Black Pride event at Piedmont Park, but events or locations tailored to queer people of color rarely showed up in my Google searches. This is not to say these spaces do not exist but that they may not be easily accessible via "conventional" means like Google which may emphasize white audiences. Thus, my racial identity allowed me to access white queer spaces and events but may have limited my ability to find or be invited to queer spaces oriented towards people of color. This racial reality also impacted the demographics of my interviewees. In total, three of my participants identified as

[13] More information about Bear's context and its patrons can be found in Chapter 6, "Weirdo Habitus."

Black, one as Asian, and the other nine as white. Due to the racial constraints created by my positionality, I warn readers that this is an primarily white study and that further scholarship with queer people of color by queer people of color is needed.

My identity as a gay man also greatly impacted my research process. Over the course of my fieldwork, I was consistently the only man in the Nashville Group. At times, my gendered difference was extremely obvious like when Athena and Sasha were dividing the bedrooms in the Nashville AirBnB and, as the only man, I was given a mattress in the downstairs living room, a whole floor away from the others. I was painfully aware that my gayness granted a level of access into the lives of these women not permitted to straight men. Unlike my heterosexual counterparts, I was allowed to participate in conversations that critiqued straight men, given kisses on the cheek and hugged, and heard in-depth stories about sexual lives. My lack of sexual interest marked me as different from other men.

There were moments where my positionality as a gay man allowed me to take a front row seat to the structural violence my participants faced as women. For example, Annie rode MARTA for the first time when we were on our way to Midtown for a drag show, later telling me that she would never take MARTA alone as a woman. On the way back from Nashville, Athena pulled over at a gas station to wipe her windshield. Noticing a strange man staring at her as she bent over to clean the glass, I got out of the car and stood in front of her to dissuade the man from approaching. While attending Second Friday with the Nashville Group, someone asked me to "go check on Sasha" who looked painfully uncomfortable as a strange, "masc" woman clung tightly to her side. These moments illuminated the everyday dangers present in the lives of these queer women, moments I probably would not have been given access to if I were a straight man given the ways that straight men — or at least masculinity in the example of the

"masc" woman — were explicitly associated with danger. I asked Alpha about the level of access I've been given and why my presence was permitted with the Nashville Group during our interview. She responded, "It's cause you're gay […] you have that one tick of not being 100% privileged and your one thing is a big deal to a lot of people" thus insinuating that my gayness gave me a level of camaraderie with these women against the heterosexist world.

Although I was grateful for the access my positionality as a gay man gave me, it did leave me feeling unsettled. Whether through the access I was given to the lives of queer women or passive comments from friends and family that insinuated gay men were apart from "regular men," I began to understand that my gayness was emasculating. I became torn by this new realization. I was grateful to be seen as apart from the problem — as problematic as that viewpoint is — and yet could not help but feel a great level of shame. I began to monitor my tone of voice and vocal patterns, I hid away my rings, chipped off my nail polish, and avoided talking about my research with others out of fear of being seen as just another gay man studying gay things. In essence, I realized I carried a lot of internalized sexual stigma.[14] I continue to struggle with this "beside man" status that I have been given and although the academic within me is rolling his eyes, that does not change the fact that I am a product of the social world around me and this kind of, for lack of a better word, emasculation was anxiety inducing. In essence, although I was grateful for the level of access I was granted and the number of relationships I could build as a "pseudo-man," I was by no means exempt from the self-stigmatizing implications. It is my advice to any scholar who seeks to study the stigmatizing realities of a group they belong to that they prepare to meet their own internalizations. It is a highly emotional,

[14] The incorporation of stigma surrounding one's sexual identity into their self-concept (Herek, Gills, and Cogan 2015).

conflicting process that requires a level self-compassion and an acceptance of one's own limitations.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Through semi/unstructured interviews and participant observation, I was able to alter my research question to reflect my participants' understandings of the closet and the importance of weirdness in performing sexuality. These methods also revealed the necessity of expanding my recruitment parameters to include queer individuals of all gender orientations. Furthermore, the fact that these methods were constructive of my research question ensures the appropriateness of these methods. I consider this pivot a major success for my research, but I still grappled with the ethical concerns of intoxication and my own internalized sexual stigma surfaced by the access my positionality permitted. I am aware of my study's methodological limitations. Although I collected enough interviews to identify important meta-themes, I did not interview enough people to find significant differences across race, class, gender, and sexual identities. Furthermore, my status as a full-time student and corporate employee significantly limited the number of events I could participate in. The temporal realities of my thesis also greatly limited my research. I often fantasize about the level of variation and depth I could have captured regarding the experience of performing sexuality if I had two years to conduct research instead of five months. I am even more frustrated when I begin to ponder how much information I could have gained if I had not been a full-time employee. As Annie has said to me on more than one occasion, "we must all toil in this capitalist hellscape." Despite these limitations, I hope my methodological choices, mistakes, and insights only further the cause of studying the performativity of sexuality.

# 4 AN OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study's participants. The brief descriptions below are meant to communicate the impressions each of these individuals left on me over the course of my fieldwork which in turn has influenced my analysis. My participants are filtered into two groups; those whom I met during Nashville Pride and those I met elsewhere. Although there is variation between and within these groups there are some consistent trends. Nine of the participants (Olivia, Alpha, Athena, Tanya, Meg, Art, Fitz, Lewis, and Lisa) grew up in deeply Christian environments that explicitly demonized queer identity and same-sex attraction. Most participants are transplants to the Atlanta area, although eight grew up in the US south, specifically Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida (Olivia, Alpha, Florence, Tanya, Annie, Art, Fitz, and Lewis). Furthermore, all participants are between the ages of 21 and 31 and possess at least a bachelor's degree (except for Ambi who is currently working on his). Apart from Ambi, Lewis, and Art, these individuals all possessed white collar jobs as teachers, research analysts, corporate employees, and medical professionals, which permitted a level of financial independence. Most individuals were not in any sort of romantic relationship when I met them, although almost all had experiences with long-term monogamous relationships in the past. These factors in mind, my participants represent a particular life stage in American conceptualizations of idealized middle-class personal development; they are no longer dependent on caregivers for financial support, but they do not possess the kind of "settled" status assigned to management positions, home ownerships, and marriage.

Taken together, the queer Atlantans I worked with are crafting lives starkly different from those of their relatively recent childhoods. They have built close networks of queer friends to fill

the gaps left by family members living across state lines; all have left the churches they were part of, and several grapple with the non-empirical in highly syncretic ways; and they are trying to find ideal careers, hobbies, friends, and romantic partners, all the while finding themselves. In fact, this idea of the need to *discover* the asocial essential self while also learning how to *express* the self through enculturation by a peer group is a central tension in the upcoming chapters. The people I describe below are not just any group of 20 somethings but represent a collection of individuals in the process of carving out a world for themselves that is quite different than the one they left. All names listed below are pseudonyms.

## 4.2 The Nashville Group

The Nashville Group was initially assembled by Sasha who developed an expansive web of queer friends via the dating/social networking site Bumble. In the past, the group primarily met to attend Second Friday but has since expanded its activities to include pool parties, birthday parties, game nights, pride events, etc. Although the group's membership shifted slightly over the course of my fieldwork, I had the chance to interview several of its members and attend several of their events. There are 16 individuals (not counting myself) in the group chat used to organize these events; however, the actual number of attendees varied. I was able to interview seven of its members who also attend the group's events with relative consistency:

### *4.2.1 Olivia (she/her)*

Olivia is a white demi-sexual[15] lesbian woman and a relatively recent permanent resident of Atlanta. She has a bubbly, warm personality and is a master in the art of conversation, able to balance the sensitive with the humorous. Like me she was a newcomer to the group during Nashville Pride but has since become a consistent attendee in its gatherings. An enjoyer of any

[15] For Olivia and many others, a demi-sexual person is someone who does not feel sexual attraction to another unless they share a strong emotional bond.

conversation pertaining to romance and sexuality, she can always be counted on for a fascinating thought or two on human relationships.

#### *4.2.2 Alpha (she/her)*

Alpha is a Black lesbian woman originally from the metro-Atlanta area and a longtime friend of both Sasha and Athena. Her pseudonym was initially a placeholder, one that was haphazardly scribbled in my fieldnotes because of her ability to command a room. Inspired by her self-described tendency to "say what I want to say and to speak my mind," Alpha found the pseudonym amusing and we decided to keep it. Able to compliment her honesty with notes of humor, Alpha is a consistent joy to be around.

#### *4.2.3 Athena (she/her)*

I owe much of my field success to the connections, perspectives, and feedback Athena provided me as a key participant in this project. An Asian lesbian woman who has lived in Atlanta for the better half of a decade, Athena is close friends with most of the individuals listed in this section and has hosted or helped organize several of the Nashville group's gatherings. Her sporty, energetic, and kindhearted personality can cause others to gravitate towards her. Although constantly describing herself as socially anxious, she has never met a room she could not win over.

#### *4.2.4 Florence (she/her)*

A white lesbian woman originally from southern Florida, I struggle to come up with a better word to describe Florence than "cool." She is calm, collected, witty, and able to find beauty in the mundane, making her the kind of person others try and model themselves after. I truly believe there is no genre of music, no matter how specific or obscure, that she has not heard. An especially close friend of Athena, I always found Florence to be a grounding presence

in the Nashville Group, someone who is incredibly fun but also capable of slowing down and enjoying quiet moments.

#### *4.2.5 Tanya (she/they)*

I have an infinite amount of respect for Tanya. A white lesbian person who spent the majority of her childhood around the periphery of Atlanta, Tanya is fiercely loyal and protective over those closest to her. She balances this protectiveness with a level of warmth that accentuates the safety she seeks to provide for others. Tanya's closeness to other members of the Nashville group seems to ebb and flow slightly. That is not to say there are great ruptures in her relationships, but that she is capable and comfortable building and enhancing those relationships at different times.

#### *4.2.6 Sasha (she/her)*

The world could use a few more Sashas in it. A white lesbian woman, she is incredibly kind and will go out of her way to ensure a straggler is not forgotten. This compassion, combined with her role in forming the group, has made her a kind of de facto leader. Indeed, it is this leadership that led her to organize the Nashville trip and several other events. Despite this position, she possesses a level of humility and grace that anyone would do well to learn from. Of those group members listed in this section, she seems closet with her girlfriend Meg, Athena, and Alpha. Although I did not have the opportunity to interview Sasha, she appears in several of my fieldnotes and is featured within the vignettes of this thesis.

#### *4.2.7 Meg (she/her)*

Out of everyone listed above I know the least about Meg. A black lesbian woman and the girlfriend of Sasha, she struck me as warm, easy going, and quite funny. Although I did not get

the opportunity to interview Meg, she did participate at the tail end of the Nashville Group interview and some of her comments are mentioned in this project.

## 4.3 Participants Met Elsewhere

I recruited other participants for this study through a variety of methods including leveraging my existing social networks, talking with random strangers at Bear, and circulating information about my project among a few of Georgia State University's anthropology classes. The individuals I recruited through these methods are described below:

### *4.3.1 Ambi (he/they)*

A Black and indigenous gay person originally from Chicago, Ambi will make an excellent psychologist one day if he continues down his current academic track. He is an incredibly attentive person, and I was struck by how often he tried to ensure *I* was comfortable in our interactions – something that is normally the concern of the ethnographer. A thinker and very sensitive, Ambi is comfortable discussing several different interpretations of the same event but often emphasizes "energies" as a key sensation for understanding people.

### *4.3.2 Annie (she/her)*

Like Athena, my study would have amounted to little without the insights and critiques offered by Annie. A key participant and incomparable friend, Annie has a heart of gold. She is a white bisexual woman who has lived in Atlanta for two years and possesses the unique talent of making relatively new relationships seem like lifelong friendships. Preemptively minimized by her own humility, Annie's brilliance can only be described as astoundingly self-evident.

### *4.3.3 Antonio (he/him)*

A white gay man who has lived in Atlanta for just under two years, Antonio is quick to make a joke. Like Ambi, he is a thinker but prefers to do much of his processing out loud. This

occurs fairly frequently, as Antonio is prone to the delights of existentialism in conversations with others. A friend to some of the people mentioned in both sections, Antonio is a self-described introverted extrovert who enjoys social gatherings and is equally exhausted by them.

#### *4.3.4 Art (they/her)*

As their name suggests, Art's life is marked by creativity. Originally from Florida, Art has toured different parts of the country in their indie band and supplements their income by making stickers and prints to sell at public events. A white trans gay person, Art is soft-spoken and utilizes slow, smooth movements when handling objects. Art struck me as the kind of person who observes life while they live it. Whatever they experience they do so with the lens of, well, and artist.

#### *4.3.5 Ernest (he/him)*

Ernest will always hold a special place in my memories of this research. A white gay man who is new to Atlanta and a friend to Florence and Athena, he was the first person I interviewed for this project. He speaks with a slower cadence giving the impression of carefully selected and weighted words. Like Ambi, he is attentive but in a more subtle way. He has an ability to make what someone says or asks, no matter how ineloquent, feel important.

#### *4.3.6 Fitz (he/him)*

Fitz is one of the most adventurous people I have ever met. A gay man who describes himself as having a "50% Black American, 25% white French and then 25% white British" racial identity, Fitz organizes his life through one goal, "at the end of the year I want to be somewhere else." Prone to physical acts of affection and a warm inviting smile, Fitz can sweep a listener up in his stories and commentaries about the world.

#### *4.3.7 Lewis (he/him)*

When I met Lewis he was on the verge of several life changes. A white gay man from Spalding County, he is recently divorced from a woman, close to finishing a master's degree in music education, and recently decided that the term gay was a better fit for him than bisexual. From his stories, he struck me as a man who loved deeply (at times to his own detriment). A heavily romantic person with passionate memories of running through fields with former lovers, Lewis is like a movie protagonist for whom the viewer demands a happy ending.

#### *4.3.8 Lisa (she/her)*

A white lesbian woman, Lisa is unavoidably lovable. A contagious laugh and smile preface the highly reflexive and profound observations she weaves together about the world around her. Often filled with useful and nuanced caveats, those observations were incredibly influential for my understanding of queer performativity in Atlanta. She is loyal and humane to everyone she encounters, often adding an underappreciated note of kindness to even her most mundane actions.

### 4.4 Conclusion

Although quite diverse, the participants in this study do represent a shared life stage, and have similar class, religious, and geographic background. Just as my positionality as a white gay man impacted the kind of access I could obtain as a researcher, so too do the participants I recruited impact the kind of claims this thesis can make. I do not claim that my research represents the entirety of the "queer experience" for all people living in the metro-Atlanta area. Rather, my research represents one aspect of the complex sociocultural worlds in which these particular individuals live that may have implications for understanding queerness in or beyond the Atlanta area. Furthermore, I do not present these details only to situate my participants

demographically. I could have summed up this chapter in a chart reflecting everyone's intersectionality and placed it carelessly in the appendix of this thesis, but in taking the time to describe the impressions my participants left on me, I hope that I have added a level of humanity and relatability that can sometimes get lost in social scientific writing. Commenting on their likes, their kindnesses, and their smiles is my attempt to humanize a population who is often reduced to political conjecture.

# 5 PRESSURE, POLLUTION, AND PERFORMATIVITY IN COMING OUT NARRATIVES

## 5.1 Ernest

“So, he's just under two years older than me. He just got married a couple of years ago to this girl that he had been dating since high school. They had gone to college together and he studied computer science and business. And now he's a software engineer making buckets of money and we’re very different in that sense.” Ernest is describing his older brother. We are about an hour into our interview and have only just started talking about his experience coming out. Ernest is my first interviewee for this project, and I am filled with the similar excitement, confusion, and anxiousness that accompanies every new academic endeavor. By contrast I find Ernest to be a calming presence. He has a full voice that borders between a baritone and a tenor with short curly hair that will grow to the lower part of his neck by the same time next year. He talks like a literary scholar which makes sense given his recent graduation from a UK English master’s program. Purposeful pauses, the interrogation of word choice, and critical reflection characterize his responses to my questions. His contagious laugh and wit are juxtaposed by his surroundings. Although I am limited in my perspective due to the confines of virtual meeting spaces like this Zoom call, the bare-faced beige wall behind him is at odds with the colorful ebbs and flows of his disposition.

“And when I came out to him, I know he was in the car driving somewhere. And I think I made him say it. I was like, ‘I have to tell you something. Like I can't say it's like what.’ And then we just like went through that circle a bunch and then he was like, ‘What are you gay or something?’ And I was like, ‘Yes.’ He was like, ‘Oh, okay. That's fine.’ So, he probably already knew. But I couldn't bring myself to say on that first one” explains Ernest.

“Why him?” I ask while squinting at the chicken scratch on my notebook.

“I don't know. I think because a certain element of it still felt private as in like within the home or the family, within my immediate family. And yeah, I don't know. I think because I was confident that if I told him that I don't want to tell anyone else that he would keep my confidence.”

**“**How do you know that?”

**“**Um, I don't know. I can't say. I can't say why I trusted him with that. I just did and he never he never said anything homophobic growing up or yeah. I don't know. There was none of that. And the people he was friends with weren't, you know, kinda douche jock types making gay jokes and whatnot. So also based on how his friend group was, at least for our little suburban town, rather alternative. Yeah. I just did not fear judgment from him.”

**“**In the car. [You] were driving somewhere. What was it that triggered this as being a conversation?”

**“**Again, I can't really say why. When I kinda made up my mind when I was like, ‘Okay, I'm going to tell people’ it kind of just happened. Yeah, I know that's a deeply unsatisfying answer. I probably have some amnesia over the whole thing. Yeah. Again, it's not like he prompted me or certain conversation prompted it. I just decided to tell him.”

“Do you consider yourself a kind of person who follows their gut a little bit more?”

“Yes, I've been known to be impulsive, but I'm simultaneously very indecisive about things. So yeah, maybe coming out was an impulsive decision.”

### 5.2 Between Impulsive and Calculated

Looking back on this interview I sympathetically scoff at my questioning of Ernest’s “impulsiveness.” What he and I understood as the potential manifestation of an impulsive

personality in his coming out experience was the product of a more clinical perspective on the closet and coming out. In an attempt to analyze and conceptualize these social phenomena and their relation to stigma, scholars of sexual identity have described coming out as a kind of social trigonometry, requiring the triangulation of several social factors to determine the angle of identity disclosure that would be safe and appropriate for a given context (Orne 2013; Yap et al. 2020; Harper et al. 2016, 369; Allen 2022, 4). Ernest's own rationalization for why he felt he could come out to his brother indicates that there is merit to this depiction. For Ernest, he could trust his brother based on his choice of friends and a generalized aesthetic, a kind of card counting in the gamble of coming out. Ernest knew he *could* come out to his brother but that doesn't mean he planned to do it in *that* way, at *that* time, in *that* place. "It kind of just happened" even though he already had this general idea that he was going to come out. Ernest's coming out narrative dances an interesting line between calculation and impulsivity that represents a kind of bungie jumping. One knows what they are doing is a risk but they are *probably* going to be safe based on the evidence available to them. Regardless, it is terrifying. One knows that they will jump but not when or in what way. Every time they give themselves until the count of three they recoil. Eventually, it takes a kind of self-pushing, a sudden doing that was unexpected, unanticipated, and surprising.

In this chapter, I argue that the bungie-jumping-like sensation present in my participants' coming out narratives can be described as a deeply felt pressure caused by the forces of autonomous pollution on the one hand and heterosexist social reality on the other. It is coming out's release of this pressure that legitimizes queer sexuality through American essentialism's conceptualization of emotion. Furthermore, this folding of queer sexuality into American

essentialism legitimizes the shifting nature of my participants' sexuality categories via the language of self-discovery.

### 5.3 Symptoms of Truth: Queer Sexuality as Essential Self

As discussed in the literature review, American essentialism conceptualizes emotions as springing from the "true" self. In her work on conceptions of emotions in Western Europe and North America, Catherine Lutz discusses the association of emotions with nature and its pure, honest, and incorruptible states. By contrast, thought is seen as the warped and unnatural product of culture. In essence, emotion is true and honest but wild and uncontrollable. Thought is corrupted and sanitized but corrupted, insincere, and artificial. In Lutz's depiction, emotion and thought are part of the nature versus culture dichotomy. Due to their supposed "naturalness," emotions embody or point to "high truths" whist culture and its contingent thought are "disguise, artifice, or vice" (Lutz 1988, 66-68). Lutz goes on to argue that the expression of emotion carries with it a high moral claim that excuses unacceptable or immoral behaviors. If one's actions are in line with their emotions, they cannot truly be immoral (77). On the other hand, Lutz also discusses a popular framework where thought's association with culture sometimes positions it as superior to emotion. This can lead to a rationality/emotionality dichotomy where rationality – defined as historically and culturally determined assessments of how a sensible and mature human ought to behave – is denied to marginalized subjects who are labeled as "too emotional," senseless, unreliable, weak, and even dangerous due to their lack of conformity to "sensible" thought (62-63). Thus, emotional expression is a highly political phenomenon as ideas pertaining to who can express emotions and how those emotions are understood is the product and productive of power relations. Regardless of popular perceptions of rationality as superior to emotion, emotionality still has its realms of validity. These include the arenas of romance and

attraction where emotion becomes a kind of mystery that combats an overly rational, and thus potentially unnatural, world (57, 61). What is important to remember about this thought/emotion dichotomy is that when emotions are valued, they are believed to play a vital role in defining the essential self as they individualize the person from the social world around them (70-71).

Returning to their similar work on polyamory contracts in the United States, Julienne Obadia provides a window into the construction of relationships where emotional expression takes center stages in a couple's attempts to understand one another. One such contract possesses the following excerpts, "My freedom comes from the personal expression of my own power," "When something occurs that I don't like […] I will […] accept it as a part of who you are… in order to more fully understand who you are," and "…I will center myself, clarify my feelings, and determine my issues before confronting you" (2022, 514). Here, emotions are understood as the corporal representatives of an internal true self otherwise imperceptible to the outside world.

My participants' understandings of their sexualities follow a similar pattern. Towards the beginning of my interviews, I would ask each of my participants when they first knew that they were not straight. Answers ranged from sudden understandings to a slower process of realization, but every single narrative centered around *feeling* something that was somehow different. Some centered around a kind of retrospective over constant feelings –

> And I just like yeah, like now that I think about it, I like actually like stopped and it was have all these times been like when I've been obsessed with people growing up and me being queer, and then it just like, yeah, it's like definitely like, I was growing up there's so many signs that it was queer and I didn't know, you know. **(Athena)**[16]

– while others described a gradual realization initially interpreted under heterosexual frameworks:

> **Ernest**:

[16] I have attempted to keep my interview transcripts as close as possible to the actual words my participants spoke during their interviews. As such, "incorrect" grammar and repetitions have been purposefully left within the interview excerpts of this thesis.

> I mean, in one sense, like, I've always gotten along with girls better things as I think. So, the non-sexual parts of those were not difficult. I had no problem being close with girls and the sex being uncomfortable I kind of chalked up to age as being early sexual experience and not really knowing what I was doing. More often than not these girls also didn't really know what they were doing. So yeah, it just kind of seems like what we should do.
> **MAC**:
> You want to expand on what we should do?
> **Ernest**:
> What we should do? Yeah, I don't know just the cultural narrative of heteronormativity, the role models and references that I did have, of course, they're all straight, and so my brother is only two years older than me and totally straight. And so, you know, he would have girlfriends and the cool guys in my class would have girlfriends and everyone's always talking about, you know, who'd had sex and who hadn't. So yeah. So just felt like what I- what I should do.

Some of the most interesting narratives are those characterized by sudden awareness:

> Okay. So (laughs) I did model UN with the International Relations Club. Great group, it's how I met all my college friends. Were on a trip, we're on our second trip, I met this girl, [redacted]. On the first trip, we became like really good friends on that trip. And then the second trip around, we were in Chicago, we're walking down the streets of Chicago. And I remember thinking like, okay, like me and her are laughing so much. Like I feel like we could be really good friends. Like this could be my like college best friend. Like a friend I could have for life. Like we're just really getting on and feeling like great like this is awesome. Just like she's so great. And then we like got to the hotel room that night and basically I'm just lying in the hotel bed and she's next to me and I'm just thinking like, wow, I'm like so excited to have this new friend. Someone who could probably be my best friend. I remember thinking like I really wanted our arms to touch. Like it's so vivid. It was literally like we're lying in bed and she's laying there, and I was like, I just wanted to be close to her. And I was like, wouldn't it be so great if like in the night or something, our arms like touched. Mm hm. And like wanting that so bad. And then it was like I was like, oh my gosh, I've never, ever, ever wanted that with a guy. Even guys that I thought were attractive. This makes so much sense. And at that point I was like, I didn't think it was a sin. So, it was just pure relief. Because I had dated a guy freshman year earlier and had those same feelings, felt really awkward. Like holding his hand, like when he would be sweet, he was a great boyfriend. Like anytime he would be loving or like sweet to meet, made me feel so awkward. Like the physical stuff was fine. Like I didn't hate it like I was attracted to him like but then he told me one time, he was like, I feel like we're just like friends with benefits instead of in a relationship and like I was just like, I don't know I don't think I was nice to him at all because he would like do sweet things for me. And I would be like, stop that or something. And like we only dated for three months, broke up, and I was like, wow, I must just be like incapable of love. And then that happened. It was like pure relief. I was like, oh my God, like I want this with someone. I'm not going to be alone forever like. **(Olivia)**

> It was definitely an elementary school. I remember like playing on a playground and I don't even remember who remember like a guy like grabbed- there's a common theme of like people grabbing my hand and like running with me, which is weird. Never realized that before, but I remember like. It was like one of my friends, I think, but he just like, grabbed my arm and we were just like running to this field behind our elementary school. And I was like, I like him. Like I like him the way that my friends like girls. And then there were there were obviously, like other times after that where I would like, it was cemented. But I think that was like the first time that I was like. Yeah, I'm gay […] It was like. The only way it can quantify it, and this is so embarrassing to make a reference to this like in twilight. Where like they have that thing where it's like like imprinting, where it's like all of a sudden like the world, like nothing matters. It's just like like this other person that matters. It was kind of like that. Where it was like all of a sudden like my entire like world shifted almost where it was like, OK. This is this is who I am like. It was both terrifying. And like crystal clear like it just everything made sense. It was like I'm not like cause mine like even as like in elementary school I was like, why don't I like like cars and Hot Wheels and like, why don't I like what other boys like so it was this moment of like, OK, it's because I'm not like other boys. **(Lewis)**

What is fascinating about these narratives is that they embody an interesting relationship between affect and emotion which adds to Lutz's perspectives. All these narratives center around a feeling, an affect, that requires certain cultural interpretations. Ann Cvetkovich offers a useful distinction between affect and emotion in her work on the public nature of depression. For Cvetkovich, affects are precognitive sensory experience and relations to surroundings while emotions are cultural constructions and thought processes that come from affects (2012, 4). The narratives above are characterized by initial affective moment(s) that can be described as a general feeling, an impulse, or a desire. My participants interpreted these affective moments as signs of something much bigger than an isolated one-off moment of feeling. The obsession, the lack of attraction, the need for touch, the feeling of running across the field hand in hand with another boy were filtered through the lens of sociocultural convention. They were understood as equivalent to what their heterosexual counterparts are feeling thus indexing some kind of sociocultural schema (emotion) called attraction, like, love, etc. that filters, shapes, communicates, and gives understanding to affect. Within this framework, discussions of love,

attraction, and the like are performances that create and organize sensation as much as they describe them. Tanya offers an insightful account of romantic affect becoming romantic emotion:

> **Tanya:**
> This girl named Carrie, who was in my class. She was like one of my best little friends or whatever. But I had like the biggest crush on her dude and that's when I knew like, that's why I really knew. Like when I was about five or six was because of her I was like this is different.
> **Ethnographer:**
> How do you know it was different?
> **Tanya:**
> Because it wasn't a man and a woman.
> **Ethnographer:**
> How did you know that it was romantic then?
> **Tanya:**
> That's a good question. I don't think at that age I thought it was romantic, but I knew my feelings were different, if that makes sense. Because you know, you're so used to seeing heterosexuality around you. Mommy, Daddy, you know you got your uncle and aunt. Grandma. Grandpa. And it's like, OK, well, why am I feeling this way? It should be this way and I think that's why I was closeted for so long.

Affects do not speak for an essential self, only their funneling into the sociocultural schema of emotions can do that. Once the sensation has been filtered and understood as attraction and given a subsequent sexuality, then its power to represent "the truth" of someone emerges. Nowhere else is this clearer than in how my participants define the closet and coming out. To those I interviewed, the closet can be described as:

> Like not being open, not having- like not saying the words, not expressing how you really feel. **(Olivia)**

> My perspective on that is as it sounds, it's- you as a person, your ideas who you are everything authentic about you being hidden. And closeted term is being hidden within yourself, being hidden from a certain group because some people are closeted to their family. I'll say that sometimes are you just in the closet when it comes to your family, but you're out the closet when you're with us. You're with your friends, you're out the closet. So yeah, it's just hiding who you are and. Yeah, not giving it light. **(Ambi)**

> I think it goes comes down to the individual, but I think in general I would say that just not being not being like open with everyone is to some extent being in the closet. Like everyone that you come in contact with, if if someone, even if it's family, were to ask you

> about sexuality or gender and you weren't, weren't honest with them. I think that would you know, kind of be considered you know, still inclusive of that sort of in the closet thing. **(Art)**

By contrast, coming out is described as:

> That means you know being open about your sexuality, openly telling people that you're not straight, that you're gay, that you identify as this way or that way type thing. And that means different things for different people that could, you know, just telling your circle of friends that could be, you know changing your pronouns in your Twitter bio or something you know? **(Annie)**

> Um I think it's just like when you're fed up and you just are like to yourself and you're like I'm just not going to pretend like anything else is correct. Like, I'm gonna just not allow anything else besides what I identify myself as to be the conversational piece. So, coming out is when you're like or fully like when anyone says anything, I am the one who has the final say so no one else can control or make decisions on my identity in any capacity, not just my sexuality or sexuality, but my gender. Like my adjectives, just about my personality, all of that like I I make me me make me anyone else wrong so I think that's just what coming out is about. You know, whether you're gay or you're straight. Just I define myself. And that's it. **(Fitz)**

> Empowering, necessary, beautiful, also scary, existing, anxious, yeah […] Because for me I needed that to like live my life. I just needed to live my life period. Like, no, I can't even say anymore than that like I I needed to be myself around the people that I loved and like I needed them to know. Like these specific things about myself, because that's such a big part of my life. Like who I'm going to be married to and like just like the queer community in general, like that's such a big part of your life. **(Florence)**

Holding these conceptions of the closet, coming out, and first awareness of non-heterosexual identification side by side reveal that attraction and its related assigned sexuality are considered deep, inner truths about the entirety of a person. My participants understand their queer sexuality as part of their essential self because they funnel these affective moments through sociolinguistic conventions that mark them as a particular emotions which in turn indexes queerness. Following Lutz's theorizations, their emotions have pointed to and emerged from an essential truth. However, when this emotional experience requires suppression, a felt pressure emerges that creates the kind of bungie-jumping coming out that opens this chapter.

### 5.4 Repression, Tensions, and Autonomous Pollution

American essentialism not only sees the expression of emotions as representative of a true self but understands the suppression of emotion to lead to an inevitable and involuntary emotional explosion. Lutz notes a similar pattern in her analysis of how emotions are seen as occurring involuntarily, something associated with their supposed natural and "wild" nature. In the western tradition, emotions are "biological" switches that are flipped by internal or external events. There is a demand that people be held responsible for *displays* of emotion and that those who fail to do so possess some sort of weakness; however, emotions can only be reasoned away, never fully controlled. Furthermore, the idea that emotions are reactionary, biological, impossible-to-fully-control phenomena – "like a sneeze or a burp –" means that individuals can be absolved for behavior that is seen as coming from emotions (Lutz 1988, 62-64). Lutz's metaphor of a sneeze or a burp perfectly encapsulates the emotional demand for expression being an embodied sense, a deep feeling, a tension that could lead to a kind of explosion. Ideally, the way one feels should always be expressed in some socioculturally acceptable form. But holding in a sneeze, if there is no avenue for expression then internal pressure builds.

Excellent examples of the explosive nature of stifled emotions can be found in recent ethnographic work on adolescent self-harm. In their ethnographic work on self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide with New York City teenagers, Terry Williams argues that their participants' actions are a kind of "exorcism or bloodletting" of painful emotions that emerge from living within perennial crises (2017, xxx-xxxii). A similar study conducted by Thomas Csordas and Janis Jenkins investigated the lived experience of cutting among adolescents in a New Mexico mental health program. Their inductive analysis revealed that cutting represented a collapse of the boundaries between body and world. Through cutting, the flesh embodies the world's cruelty

(as evidenced by the cuts themselves) and the explosion of an internal self into the world (as evidenced by the presence of blood) (Csordas and Jenkins 2018, 224). In fact, several of these adolescents described cutting themselves as the release of internal "pressure" created by intense negative feelings (222-223). In both these cases, self-harm was an almost compulsory act that resulted from emotional stiffening. It is not that there was no cognitive agency behind these actions, indeed self-harming requires a fair bit of premeditation. However, the suppression of emotion is what leads to the eventual explosion where a young person feels like they *must* cut. Reminiscent of the good neoliberal subject becoming an entrepreneur of oneself, this moving of the internal to the external is the product of American essentialism's demand that subjects know themselves, their desires, and their feelings and express them regardless of the consequences.

This same kind of tension is present in my participants' coming out narratives. The quotes above embody the truth/lie dichotomy that is within conceptions of being out/closeted. The "true" self and its subsequent feelings need expression. There is this sense that coming out is a necessity, that being closeted is a kind of unsustainability. Olivia's metaphor of the glass closet best encapsulates this:

> **Olivia:**
> I just, I see like that glass wall. I see it as glass because it's like the other people like think you're in the room there with them. But like, you know you're not. And like I just with glass, like that's just how the metaphor is in my head. It's like there's a glass wall and like there isn't a door and you just have to like break it. But like it works the same with like a glass, you know, like closet, I guess. But for me it's just always felt like that, like a wall.
> **MAC:**
> Mhm.
> **Olivia:**
> And less of like, I'm sure you can come up with something super like philosophical or metaphorical, with the fact that there's not an existing door in the glass wall, but like.
> **MAC:**
> All right. So, here's a question. Do you consider yourself to be in or out of the closet or something else?
> **Olivia:**

I consider myself to be out of the closet. Because I'm not in the state of lying anymore about it. Even the people in my life that I'm not out to like my dad if he were to ask me, point blank, I would tell him the truth, you know?

**MAC:**

So, tell me about dad. Why can't you tell him?

**Olivia:**

I do not think that our relationship will survive that. And I know that I have to soon, like it's getting to a point where, like you always think you can, oh I just don't have to come out to this person. It's fine. And then you reach a point where that glass wall becomes like, so stifling. And it's harder to just like, little lies build up. You are like pushing people away. I was literally thinking about all this last night and I was like, you have to give people the chance to accept you because otherwise you're just going to be pushing people away your whole life and not giving them the opportunity I already- I'm like 99.9% sure that it won't go well with him, but I can't keep like, you know, it's just it's really hard to like have, you know, that glass wall with like me and my family on that side. And it's also made me, like not as close with my step siblings. Because like, I can't tell them anything because, like, they might, you know, like tell Dad or they might react poorly. Like, I just don't know. So, you know.

**MAC:**

Must be hard.

**Olivia:**

Mhm. So, I plan on doing it at some point but it's a pretty natural process for me. Like, I'll know when it's time. I knew exactly when it was time to tell my mom. Like it'll reach that point eventually where I'll know I'll have to do it.

My previous research on Closeted TikTok, a collection of public TikTok accounts and videos discussing "the closet" and "coming out," also found a similar uncomfortability with suppressing sexuality and lying to others. Appendices A and B are screenshots from the same account and video[17]. The unsettling image of multiple screaming mouths in Appendix A provides an excellent example of the tensions and anxieties that result from hiding one's patterns of desire which is depicted in Appendix B. Like Olivia's glass closet, Appendix C discusses the relational consequences of emotional suppression both through the text on the screen and the image of a lone shadow standing on an abandon lawn late at night. Appendix D is a screenshot of the

[17] The names and usernames of these videos' creators are withheld from the screenshots in the appendix to maintain confidentiality. Although these accounts and videos were public (meaning anyone on TikTok could access them without permission from the creator), I felt that the sensitive content of these videos and these creators' serious concern with protecting their offline identities merited a level of anonymity.

comments section from a video posted on another account. Here commentors are discussing the loss of the essential self and its related good life yet in doing so index the necessity of expressing that essential self.

Feeling that the glass wall is closing in, the buildup of lies, and the subsequent alienation all caused by the suppression of emotion is fascinating in its own right but throughout my research I was perplexed with the why. Why do my participants feel that the "truth" must be revealed? I find that a useful interpretation resides in the concept of autonomous pollution. The very existence of coming out points to societal assumption and expectations that heterosexuality is normative and desirable for humanity, a defining characteristic of heterosexism (Herek, Gillis, and Cogan 2015, 19). These assumptions about the desire-based identities people *should* possess are learned early and often through ordinary interactions. Among my participants, passing comments from friends, family, and religious authorities were their primary sources of heterosexist enculturation. Alpha told me of her church's consistent condemnation of queer people. Florence recalled her father's homophobic jokes. Art recalled dinner table conversations that questioned the necessity of pride flags at schools. This everyday heterosexist learning is not bound to my participants. Anthropologist Guillermo Núñez Noriega documents young Northern Mexican men's enculturation into sexual norms through enacting *andanzas* (hanging out) with other men (Noriega 2014, 42-43). Similarly, Bertram Cohler's analysis of gay men's autobiographic narratives from the 1950s to the 1990s revealed that many participants became aware of their same sex desire and the inappropriateness of that desire through everyday gendered rituals like contact sports and rough housing (Cohler 2009, 285).

A surface level analysis of these patterns and their relation to stigma would benefit from leveraging Mary Douglas' notion of matter out of place. According to Douglas, human groups

create schemas to organize the world around them. It is when an object, entity, or person crosses the lines between schema that they become matter out of place, something that cannot be made sense of and is thus in need of removal or control (2002, 45-46, 118-119). A simple look at the discrepancy between assumed heterosexuality and the reality of a person's non-heterosexual identity could explain homophobia on both the ordinary and extraordinary levels. The stigma-interested scholar may see queerness as crossing the schemas of legible gender, discursive regimes, family dynamics, etc. and homophobia as a societal attempt to purge supposed impurity. Such a scholar could then happily align this pattern with Goffman's notion of stigma being the product of a discrepancy between virtual and real identity (1986, 2). It is this theoretical framework that I would like to re-tailor to understand not stigma, but the felt pressure that results in my participants' coming out narratives.

Instead of focusing on how queer identity becomes pollutive in everyday moments to understand why Olivia *could not* come out, I argue that the framework of autonomous pollution is useful in describing why she *must* come out. According to Douglas, an individual can experience a state of intense anxiety when their private thoughts contradict dominant values and norms communicated via rituals, something she argues is "an autonomous pollution in its own right" (Douglas 2002, 169). For my participants, their private desires and associated identities contradicted the dominant values and norms of compulsory heterosexuality. Douglas goes on to argue that there are two mechanisms for resolving pollution, 1) a ritual that does not delve into the cause of the pollution and 2) a confessional rite which makes clear the nature of the offense (169-170). Coming out can be understood as a kind of confessionary rite and arguably one that aligns with the neoliberal subject's ability to be autonomous, self-directing, and capable of pursuing their own interest. The neoliberal subject may simply confess to do away with the

clatter of social convention and proceed with their entrepreneurial aims. Yet meeting this expectation is not necessarily a reality for a closeted person. The good neoliberal subject should be upfront, honest, transparent, fully embracing their essential identity (Clare 2017), and thus doing away with the supposed hold the social world has around them. However, the fear of losing family, friends, and other loved ones makes the confessionary rite almost impossible[18]:

> I think in the times where I was saying like saying it's wrong and I'm not like that, I didn't have those feelings. I was pushing them down so hard, I like, you know, there's nothing in my life telling me that it was okay. Like my mom like my my mom to this day was like, well, we never said that to you And I was like, no, you never said it. But you took me to a church that did consistently. So, if you're going to take me to this building and I'm hearing the preacher say this as a kid, that means my parents also believe this. So like. And then also you hear the homophobic statements from your parents or from your family. So like no, like I was like, y'all never like flat out told me these things, but I'm hearing everything else. And it all like made me feel like I couldn't be like this or be this way. **(Alpha)**

> I think it was a taboo topic, OK? Yeah, there was not much. Yeah. We just didn't talk about it. I knew that was something that, like, I would make fun of gay people. I would have but not like thinking that like not out of a mean way, just like I feel like there was like some comments that were made around me or derogatory to queer individuals and I just didn't realize how offensive it was because it was so normalized. **(Athena)**

> Because I was scared, I was scared of it. Coming back to my parents and kind of the church and the community that was, that was a part of in that sense because I didn't want to feel like an outcast from that community, and I didn't know how my friends would take it. So it has a lot to do with you know, being afraid of you know how people will take it. And especially with the church community, it's like knowing where a lot of them stand as far like homosexuality in particular, it's like. You know. It was. It was a fear. And you know, it was not. It was a fear of being outed and a fear of of, you know, life changing in a way that I didn't want to. **(Art)**

> You know, I didn't think of them. There was absolutely no reference point for me. I grew up absolute suburbia. We didn't know anyone who was gay. Didn't, you know, I had no idea that celebrities could be gay. Never saw any same-sex relationships on television. It just wasn't even in my vocabulary. Except for I guess yeah, maybe later on, like in middle school and high school when everybody was calling everything gay. And faggot this faggot that. So, my first introduction to homosexuality was probably through some sort of bullying, weather witnessing it, or being the victim of it. And then no one I went to school with was out until maybe a little bit at the end. But yeah, just absolutely no point

[18] This is a fear that is not only present in the narratives of all my participants but is well documented in the coming out literature (Reyes et al. 2023, 290; Wimark 2021, 652-653; McDavitt 2008, 1)

> of reference. Not even in porn. My early porn usage was all hetero, heterosexual. **(Ernest)**

Thus, my participants exist in this contradiction between must and cannot. They must come out but there is, based on their social calculations, too much risk to do so. Here the mathematical equation for pressure may serve as a useful metaphor for the contradiction between the purging of autonomous pollution in the interest of being a good neoliberal subject and the social gamble that it entails. Pressure is defined as force over area. If water is shot through a tube with substantial force and yet the tube itself has a small area, there is a significant buildup of water pressure. In the case of coming out, force can be defined as the "must;" the secret emotions that cause autonomous pollution and the subsequent need to purge autonomous pollution in the interest of being a full subject within the regime of American essentialism. Area can be defined as the "cannot" moments, the social reality of a heterosexist society which are felt in the everyday ways that a non-heterosexual identity is marked as undesirable. Thus, like large amounts of water flowing through a clogged drain, that pressure will need an eventual release.

## 5.5 Releasing Pressure Through Coming Out

> I'm trying to think because I I want to say no, so I remember it taking a long time to like come out for the first time to one of my friends. And you know that was still like a level of uncertainty even in that moment, so like that sort of doubt and like, but knowing at least like, where I'm at enough to be honest with someone else for the first time was like a moment of you know, kind of expressing that honesty within myself to someone else […] Pretty much my best friend at the time she was someone that was always I was always hanging out with in high school. Someone that like we both liked art kind of in the same way and I feel like we kind of shared a like certain like identity, I guess I don't know how they best describe that, but like we there was a certain connection, I guess that we had umm and I knew like before coming out to her that she was pansexual, so she was open about that, and that made me feel more comfortable, you know, approaching her and saying, you know, I think I might be, you know, something like this as well […] So like we, I think we were going to Taco Bell or something. So so, we were like we got food and then we were like sitting in the car. I think we were like driving to the the like college campus. I was just like you know, I think I might. you know, be not straight. You know, like, like I I didn't really know how to express it at the time, but I was like, you know, maybe I'm pan or bi or something. But I I just know that I- I'm interested in men. And, you know, she was, like, very supportive and excited for me as like, I I feel like I knew

she would because I I knew what kind of person she was and I kind of knew that feeling would come from her. So that's that's what made me comfortable enough to to come out to her […] Well, gosh, I mean, because I finally had someone that I could talk about, you know, my feelings with in person. It was, it was such a long process of coming to terms with it, with myself, so finally being able to actually speak it into speak it from my mouth to someone, or just such a relief because of all that time of kind of building up. When you actually speak something like that, I feel like there's a a certain honesty that comes with it, that assuredness that you can actually feel. As opposed to just these thoughts in your head cause when things just exist in your head, it it doesn't quite exist the same way as kind of speaking it to someone I feel. **(Art)**

But when we broke up again with the like I don't know how to deal with emotions. I literally like flipped out. I this is the first time that I... I told my mom this is what I said I said like I was a mess I was just like a full mess and I was like, I have to tell you something. Like, don't- if you tell Dad like I'll literally never talk to you again. Don't tell dad. I'm only telling you this because I'm like, not OK. Right now, [redacted] and I were together. We were dating and that's all I'm going to say about it. And we just broke up and I'm really upset and I need your help. And that was it. **(Florence)**

[…] it was my friend Jennifer. And you know. She had already been making hints to, like, oh, what do you like? She would be talking about boys that she like and she'd be like, well, what do you think about him? And like, she gave me the space to be who I was so that I knew that in that time when I did come to her ready that it it wasn't going to be a shock […] Well, it was. It was one of the situations that I told you where she would be she'd be like, oh, well, I'm thinking about this boy. And she was like, what do you think about them? And I just I looked at her. I was like, I think they're cute and she was like what and I was like, yeah, I I think they're cute. And she was like, what does what do you mean cute? And I was like, I'm I think they're attractive. And I think y'all would be very cute together. And she was like, so you think guys are attractive? And I was like, yeah, she was like, so you're gay? And I was like, yeah. So so it wasn't even really like me coming out. It was just me answering questions […] Is this me being honest for the first time in my life? Umm yeah. And then she was like, she was like, cool man. And I was like, yeah […] It felt good, it felt. I hate to keep using like the same word, but like it it did feel empowering. To be like yeah this is this is who I am. **(Lewis)**

Going into 2014, I literally sat in my bathroom on my floor and I created this group text that went to my closest group of friends where was like 7 of them and I said hi happy New Years. I know we all have resolutions, blah blah blah, but one of mine is to finally like be truthful coming out, they all accepted me like they were they literally all of them were like we already knew we were just waiting for you to say something. I was like, why didn't you guys just ask? It would have made it so much easier for me […] I feel like it would. Uh. Well, I feel like at that point in my life I was kind of waiting for someone to ask me, so I. Could be yeah. Yeah. That's what it is. But at the same time, I'm a little bit scared so. I just thought group chat. Send it. Let people respond. I literally went and hung out with all of them the next day and they like, we love you, blah blah. Nothing's going to change that so I feel like receiving that type of support just made it so much easier for

> me, made me feel so much safer, and then after I came up to them, I told my mom and she basically said the same thing. She was like I already knew. I read your journals like, OK, Cool. Yeah. **(Tanya)**

The four narratives above are meant to give a sense of the pressure that precedes coming out. What is apparent in all of them is the need to express what is felt as part of the essential self, an inability to do so because of social fears, an assessment of the person one is coming out to, the leap of faith in actually coming out, and the release of pressure. Art struggled with the possibility of coming out but knew her friend would be a safe person to come out to in part because of her pansexuality. Florence needed to release the emotional tension caused by her breakup with her first girlfriend and for some reason her mother was safer than her father. Lewis experienced a kind of empowerment and sense of honesty in coming out to a friend who was safer than the much more homophobic school and home environment he was living in. Tanya was waiting for a moment to come out to her high school friends, a group she describes as fictive kin, and decided to simply send a text in the spirit of New Years. Returning to the metaphor of a pipe, these narratives are characterized by a great amount of force (the need to tell someone, to be a fully realized neoliberal subject, to alleviate autonomous pollution) and a small area (the limited possibilities granted by the heterosexist world around them). The great amounts of force and little area creates intense pressure. These relatively safe loved ones are what allows for the release of pressure. They are like a weak point in the pipe, somewhere that allows a burst to happen. Just as no one predicts a pipe to break at the exact moment it does, it appears that no one planned to come out at *that* time and in *that* way. Like calculating when a pipe will burst but not knowing when, my participants felt they had to and will come out, but the exact moment was a relative mystery until it happened.

My participants are not the only ones with this narrative pattern. A shallow look at contemporary queer literature reveals a similar narrative trajectory where coming out is almost always surprising and unexpected. In *Red, White, and Royal Blue*, the queer identity of Prince Henry is revealed by an impromptu kiss he gives Alex Claremont-Diaz in a fit of annoyance (McQuiston 2019, 104-108). In *Northranger*, the queer identity of Henry Tyler is revealed when he unexpectedly kisses Alex Muñoz after the latter accidently calls him handsome in a fit of rage (Terciero and Indigo 2023, 114-119). The popular contemporary queer graphic novel series, *Heartstopper*, centers around Nick Nelson and Charlie Spring's budding romantic relationship, Nick's gradual realization of his sexuality, and his experience with coming out. Throughout the series, whenever Nick comes out (always unexpectedly) Charlie is overwhelmed by the action, understanding Nick's public expression of his sexuality as evidence of his affection. Appendices E-G are from the final pages of the first volume after Nick tells Charlie he is ready for their relationship to become public and proclaims his attraction to Charlie for the world to hear (Oseman 2020, 271-273, 277). Oseman also shows the less romantic side of coming out, one characterized by extreme fear. Appendices H-J depicts the moment Nick comes out to his mother, something planned only in an abstract sense, and the intense emotional outpour and apparent fear that follows (281, 284-287). In each of these cases, coming out is relatively unplanned, even unintentional, and above all highly emotional. In these works, every "I'm gay/bi," either communicated through a kiss, a slip up, or an actual statement is a climatic plot point. One final example can be seen in the novel *Into This River I Drown* by TJ Klune, a queer author who tends to focus his stories on already out queer characters experiencing grief or loss of some kind. In this work Benji, a young gay man living in rural Oregon, reflects on the death of his father and his experience coming out to him. In a short flashback Benji remembers working

on a construction project with his father who, frustrated by Benji's absentmindedness, demands that he articulate whatever is bothering him. Benji finally tells his father that he is gay and what follows is a tender depiction of a father's unconditional love for his son (2019, 27). Like the narratives above there appears to be a pressure inside Benji that demands release in a moment he did not concretely plan or even anticipate.

Taken together, the popular literature, the social media posts, and the narratives of my participants describe queer sexuality as something emotionally realized, emotionally suppressed, and emotionally revealed in sudden and unexpected ways for both the closeted person and their loved one. This emotionality becomes all the more fascinating when its relation to queer legitimacy becomes apparent.

### 5.6 Queer Legitimacy

By being an emotional event, coming out narratives frame queer sexuality as part of my participants' essential self. As previously noted in the work of Lutz, emotions are seen as representing the uncorrupted truth of someone. The expression of this truth can excuse an otherwise immoral behavior or state of being. The circulation of coming out narratives that appear impulsive, sudden, surprising, and thus emotional rather than thoughtful frames queer sexuality as an essential aspect of the expressor. If emotions are seen as indexing priori truths about people, and one's sexuality is emotionally expressed, then any denial of queer identity goes against the entire regime of American essentialism and, as Lutz points out in her discussions of emotions and morality, potentially immoral (1988, 79).

One example of American essentialism's legitimization of queer identity comes from recent political debates on the appropriateness of queer people, thought, and expression around children. As of June 2023, 525 "anti-LGBTQ+ bills" were introduced into law at varying levels

of government (Shoenbaum 2023). Many of these bills included restrictions around discussions of sexuality and gender in K-12 schools, permitting religious exceptions to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people, book bans, and limiting trans people's access to sports, bathrooms, and gender affirming care (Lavietes and Ramos 2022; Villarreal 2023). The supposed purpose for these laws is to protect children from critical pedagogies around gender and sexual identity that are equated to "grooming" and making children "vulnerable" to developing a queer identity (Lempinen 2022).

My participants were keenly aware of the political debates that centered on the appropriateness of their proximity to children and in one instance were quick to discredit them by leveraging American essentialism. The following is an excerpt from an impromptu unstructured interview with the Nashville Group. In what follows, the group started by talking about the appropriation of queer aesthetic codes by straight people before transitioning to discuss the informal purge of queer identities in educational settings.

**Tanya:**
But I mean you have to see though if you really pay attention to the trends, cis men and women who identify as straight they completely have taken our culture of subculture and you can see it in fashion, you can see it the way they carry themselves but then they turn that around, pull an UNO reverse card and continue to spew hate but yet-
**Meg:**
Oh, we don't want our kids around that.
**Tanya:**
But they'll piggyback off of our style and our culture.
**Olivia:**
Yeah.
**Meg:**
That argument makes zero sense because every single one of us homosexuals was brought up in a heterosexual environment. (Several yeses from the group) You can't tell me that your kid being around a gay person gon make your kid gay. If they want to do that that's cause that's- (inaudible)
**Olivia:**
It's like there's no difference in like knowing your teachers gay but it's like if straight teachers have pictures of their straight spouses all the fucking time.
**Unknown:**

All the time. All the time.
**Tanya:**
See if I would have had a gay teacher that could have taken me through like elementary and middle school I think I would have felt much safer coming out at an early age.
**Meg:**
Yes.
**Tanya:**
Compared to coming out my senior year of high school.
**Meg:**
Mhmm (agreement).
**Tanya:**
But we don't have that representation because it's so hidden.
**Olivia:**
Yeah.
**Meg:**
Yeah.
**Olivia:**
And like I'm gay at school is seen as something that's like especially in like a school setting is like-
**Tanya:**
I mean now we're seeing teachers who are being forced out of their positions-
**Olivia:**
Yeah.
**Tanya:**
Or just straight up fired for certain (inaudible).
**Olivia:**
Being gay or celebrating pride (inaudible) just being yourself.

There are two key invocations of American essentialism that are important to point out here. 1) Meg's assertion that simply being around queer people will not influence the sexuality of a child as being around straight people did not influence her sexuality as a lesbian. Such a claim relies on the incorporation of all sexualities into American essentialism to position them as individual "true" aspects of self that are devoid of social influence. If sexuality is essentialized, as the pressure filled narratives of coming out proports it to be, then the very idea of some sort of contagious queerness holds no merit. 2) Olivia's assertion that being gay and celebrating pride are equivalent to "being yourself." In contrast to Meg, Olivia's claim takes on the morality of the belief in contagious queerness. If being a good neoliberal capitalist subject means expressing our

essentialist selves through emotional acts like celebration, then how can any individual be sanctioned for doing so? In either case, the incorporation of queerness into American essentialism, made possible in part by the emotionality of coming out, destabilizes heterosexist logics. Indeed, so powerful is coming out's ability to fold queer sexuality into American essentialism that the confessional rite has become a social good[19] meant to alleviate the harmful discrepancy between private and public lives in the fields of psychology, education, and activism (Garnets, Kimmel, and Levy 2003, 191-192; Rasmussen 2004, 145; Human Rights Campaign 2023).

The use of American essentialism to legitimize queer identity is not just bound to my queer participants but can be found among their heterosexual relatives. Several of my participants recalled the parenting strategies of their mothers that appear to be grounded in an essentialist logic. Antonio recalled his mother telling him that she and his father "simply let me be who I was" when it came to the toys he was interested in, the games he liked to play, or the friends he made. Many of these choices were interpreted by his mother as early signs of his gay identity. Similarly, Fitz recalled that his mother would never use identity terms in the house:

> We weren't allowed to use those words in the house. I don't remember hearing the term Black until or even biracial for that matter until I went to school with white kids and I was seven years old. So, like, my mom made it a point to not use any kind of verbiage of identity. And whenever I would ask for Brats dolls or, like, I wanted a Strawberry Shortcake movie or whenever I wanted like, a Ben10 thing or like anything else, like my mom allowed me to have all of my interest without necessarily gendering or calling them anything, right?

Like Antonio's mother, Fitz's mother paid attention to these behaviors and considered them symptomatic of an essentialist identity. By the time Fitz came out to her, she was already working under the assumption that he was pansexual. For both these mothers there was an

[19] Objects people are socioculturally directed towards to obtain happiness from or experience happiness in anticipation of (Ahmed in Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 33-34, 40)

emphasis on attempting to discover their child's essentialist self (of which sexuality was included) through the material culture that their children took a liking to, a kind of emotional state that manifests itself in consumption. This parenting framework once again challenges the idea of contagious queerness by asserting that these identities, and their expressions through material desires, were independent of any other social agents.

One final example lies in a conversation I had with an Uber driver on the way home from conducing participant observation at Second Friday. After the exchange of pleasantries where I revealed my identity as a researcher with an interesting in queer performativity and stigma, the driver (a Black woman around the age of 40) remarked, "Oh you are in the wrong city for that." When I countered with some of my participants' experiences, she was surprised. She explained that she has always been a supporter of people "living their truth" and was shocked by some of my initial findings considering the number of (supposedly queer) people she drove around who were "living their truth and demanding that you accept them." She then proceeded to talk about her nephew, a recently out trans man, and the struggles she has with his trans identity. Although she was vague on what exactly made her uncomfortable she did explain that "When it's other people, I encourage them to live their truth. But it's different when it's someone you know." This woman provides a fascinating look into the power of American essentialism to legitimize queer identity. For my Uber driver there is conflict and confusion around how she understands her nephew. There is something different about this experience that needs to be identified but regardless of what that unknown thing is, the incorporation of queer identity into American essentialism is not questioned. For her, the right for people to "live their truth" is a given, even in the presence of unresolved and private transphobia.

I am in no way claiming that the emotional nature of the coming out narratives are solely responsible for the folding of queer identity into American essentialism and the subsequent legitimacy it provides. Rather, I argue that these coming out narratives circulate at the very least between queer people, queer literature, and queer social media but undoubtedly beyond these realms and into more heterosexual worlds. The emotional nature of coming out narratives seems to essentialize queer sexuality for my participants at the very least and at most contribute to the shifting discursive regimes that allow non-queer loved ones to see queerness as part of the essential self and thus deserving of acceptance. What is important in the above examples is not that they necessarily center around coming out, but that they too emphasize the "true self" of American essentialism thus creating a powerful political force. However, the Uber driver's story also encapsulates one key caveat in American essentialism's ability to legitimize queer identity. Although the application of this dominant ethnopsychological regime has legitimizing power, it does not have the same power for all people or across all contexts. American essentialism is certainly not the only ethnopsychological paradigm at work in the United States nor is it mutually exclusive with others. Its use may not be impactful to those social worlds and persons who leverage other conceptualizations of the self, emotions, and desire. Nor would the folding of queer sexuality into American essentialism hold any merit for people and contexts who perceive non-heterosexuality as pollutive to the assumed innate heterosexual self.

It bears reminding that the felt pressures and emotionality that characterizes the coming out narratives above are not neutral representations of a nomothetic phenomenon. Following Judith Butler's claim that performances are simultaneously the products and producers of discourse,[20] I argue that the coming out narratives found across social media, my interviews, and

[20] Specifically, I leverage her notion that performative acts create discursive subjects while requiring discursive histories that precede and condition these subjects (Butler 1993, 17-18).

queer literature are productive of queer sexualities incorporation into American essentialism. These narratives do not simply describe the folding of queer sexuality into American essentialism but create that folding. Furthermore, the language around there being a “true” self that is expressed in coming out is not simply a use of American essentialism’s discourses, but a performative act that perpetuates this ethnopsychological paradigm and expands it to include queerness. Finally, these coming out stories do not simply describe a shared experience but are productive of that shared experience when coming out narratives circulate as scripts for future queer folk to leverage and rework. Thus, coming out is a key moment in queer performativity as it not only represents the first time someone marks themselves as queer, but it utilizes, reproduces, and contributes to the very discourses which simultaneously precede and construct queerness. There is one more aspect of coming out’s relationship to American essentialism that requires attention: the (in)commensurability of self-discovery.

### 5.7 The (In)Commensurability of Discovery

The great irony in the incorporation of queer identity into American essentialism is the fact that although the essential core is believed to be innate and unchanging, the idea that someone’s queer sexuality must be realized or discovered in affective moments allows for queer sexuality to be re-worked without losing its legitimacy. Several of my participants came out using a queer identity term other than the one they currently use. Antonio, Lisa, Alpha, and Athena all initially came out as bisexual and now identify as gay/lesbian except for Athena who identifies as pansexual. In fact, over the course of my fieldwork I had a front row seat to Athena’s navigation of her own sexuality. Throughout my fieldwork Athena and I became quite close, and I was often privileged with text messages on the topics of mental health, sexuality, work, or some other random musing. One night, Athena texted me a screenshot of an Instagram

post featuring a tall, tan, black haired shirtless white man with well-defined abs and pecks walking through a courtyard in baggy blue jeans. Along with the photo she sent a message that read, “Sometimes I don’t know if I’m gay bc I’d def date him.” Indeed, Athena did date men from time to time but tended to prefer women and identified as a lesbian when we first met. Soon, Athena began to confide in me about her concerns over possibly being bisexual. The following conversation occurred over text message:

> **Athena:**
> Am I bi? Fuck. AM I BI? I can’t tell anyone tho bc the gays will hate me bc of biphobia. But at the same time balls disgust me.
> **MAC:**
> Why would the gays hate you?
> **Athena:**
> Bc of biphobia. Bc lesbians don’t like girls who r bi.
> **MAC:**
> Why’s that?
> **Athena:**
> Bc they r worried that they’ll end up choosing a guy bc the added thing that society encourages heteronormativity seems like it tips the scale if u will.
> **MAC:**
> So, is this just a worry for someone in a relationship with a bi person or for any gay woman who is even friends with a bi woman?
> **Athena:**
> No no. Just relationship. Like my friends wouldn’t care but it would limit the potential of me finding ppl to date.

What should we make of her confliction? Is she “truly” bisexual? Does her abhorrence for male genitalia play a role? What of her prior dating and sexual history? None of these questions matter for my purpose. I have no interest in understanding if she is “really” bisexual. Rather, I would like to focus on how in her performance of an essential self *marks* her as either bisexual or lesbian. Her asking, “Am I bi? Fuck. AM I BI?” indexes a discovery, an emotional realization, a truth about the self she is meant to obtain. In performing essentialism through the invocation of discovery, Athena is marking herself as bisexual and recreating the link between the essential self and sexualities. Her questions index (and thus produce) an essential core that is

and always was bisexual. Athena simply needed an affective (and then emotional) moment to realize that truth. Furthermore, no matter how inconvenient or stressful this potential truth may be, the emotions that index the essential self *will* manifest and thus the realization of the essential self is unavoidable.

Lisa provides yet another wonderful example of this phenomenon. Initially identifying as bisexual, Lisa has experienced dating both men and women. After entering a committed monogamous relationship with a person who identified as a woman at that time, Lisa began to feel that the term lesbian best represented her. Once her partner came out as non-binary she began to question what the gender orientation of the person she loved meant for her sexuality:

> And then that's when I did like a little more research and this one I found out that like it's kind of the definition [of lesbian] is kind of changing [to include attraction to anyone who is not a man]. And I was like, oh, OK, because obviously I'm so very attracted to them, I love them a lot. So that was kind of confusing for me. Like how do I like, how do we go about this? When I'm not attracted to men, but my partner is non-binary and I'm very attracted to them. I was like ohh what do I do here?

What is shown in Lisa's story is the importance of feeling when taking on a sexuality category. As Olivia explained in the Nashville Group interview, when you tell someone your sexuality it "shouldn't feel like lying. It feels like the truth." However, basing sexuality on what *feels* like the truth possess a fascinating tension: at any given moment my participants are acknowledging that their current patterns of desire may be temporary and yet use essentialist language that creates a sense of permanence.

This great irony can be better understood through the lens of affective (in)commensurability. Incommensurability is an affective state where the paradoxical enters the world of norms to create new possibilities of being (Povinelli 2001). In her ethnographic work studying the emergence of the word "lesbian" in India, Naisargi Dave (2011) describes how the emergence of the phrase "Indian and Lesbian" threw together paradoxical ideas of sexuality and

citizenship that created an affective moment where anything seemed possible. This moment of incommensurability faded as “Indian and Lesbian” eventually entered the realm of normativity. However, Dave points out that this commensuration is the basis for new moments of incommensurability and credits the first New Delhi Pride Parade to the earlier “Indian and Lesbian” movement.

This process of (in)commensurability is happening on a microcosmic scale in the lives of my participants. Athena’s attraction to a man while identifying as a lesbian is a moment in incommensurability; the paradoxical has entered her life. Under the regime of American essentialism her identity *should* be set in stone and yet here it is in flux. All sorts of affective potentials are present in moments like these. Athena could have settled on a new identity category, or she could have brushed off her attraction as a strange discrepancy. Lisa could have maintained the term bi-sexual, embraced the term lesbian, or settled on another term all together. However, no matter what their choice my participants always circle back to “I am _.” Even Olivia, who explains her occasional attraction to men as a byproduct of being human, settles on the term demisexual-lesbian. In settling with an identity term that *feels* right, the incommensurable is made commensurable and the association of queer sexuality with American essentialism is maintained until the next paradoxical moment.

What is particularly fascinating about this process is the way it creates space for the messiness of eros and libido within the context of the social forces that police it. No one is so monolithic in the patterns of their desire as to ever be fully encompassed by one term, something in line with what Judith Butler calls “the impossibility of full recognition” (1993, 18). Even the straightest of men can recognize handsomeness in another man, just as the gayest of men can recognize beauty in a woman. What makes the experience of my participants so different is their

rejection of heterosexuality. In coming out, no matter with what term, these queer Atlantans have a slew of identity categories at their disposal made possible by the fact that they have denied the only socially desirable one. And yet the incorporation of those other identity terms within American essentialism and its instrumental concept of discovery provides the legitimacy needed for a relative amount of flexibility in expressing desire-based identity. What is represented by the idea of discovery is a tension between feeling and identity that allows for new potentials and their eventual relative normalization.

## 5.8 Conclusion

Emotionally charged, bungie-jumping like, pressure releasing coming out narratives are performances of both queer sexuality and American essentialism that joins to the two concepts through the latter's conceptualization of emotion. This folding of queer identity into American essentialism not only provides legitimacy for queer identities but facilitates the changing nature of desire-based identity categories through the notion of discovery. Like other regimes of selfhood, what I have depicted in the narratives of these queer Atlantans is highly adaptive to dominant sociocultural pressures such as heterosexism. These narratives are part of a shift in American essentialism from the strict conceptualization of heterosexuality as the only potential desire-based identity category, to a conceptualization of sexuality that, while still supposedly innate, internal, and unchanging, can take on multiple forms within American essentialism. Although the aforementioned coming out narratives describe queer sexuality in relatively asocial, highly individual terms, an interesting tension emerges in the performativity of sexuality after coming out. In what follows I describe the more social aspects of queer performance, those made with the purposeful intent of being seen as queer to all who know where to look.

# 6 WEIRDO HABITUS

## 6.1 Bear

A sea of muscular bodies in form fitting shirts and tight shorts sway in front of Annie and me on the second story dance floor of Bear, a night club catering to gay men in Midtown Atlanta. Located just outside the historically gay Midtown, Bear is several blocks away from the famous Rainbow Crosswalk on 10th St. and Piedmont Ave. Nestled in a pod of several other gay clubs and next to a forgettable rectangular shopping center, it is a reminder of the gay village Midtown once was. Midtown Atlanta, like gay villages across the US, was filled with opportunities for queer socialization and political mobilization. Piedmont Park, a central attraction in the Midtown area, was once a popular site for cruising and subsequent police raids (Fleischmann and Hardman 2004, 413). Although maintaining a peppering of gay bars, clubs, and the city protected Rainbow Crosswalk, the neighborhood seems to have undergone a "gentrification from within" whereby the stylistic practices of the gay village serve as the mechanism for its development but in exchange for the surrender of its non-conformity (Mattson 2015, 3145). Piedmont Park is now known for its family picnicking rather than cruising, its houses and apartments are some of the most expensive in the city, and its art museums and theaters have become defining attractions. Remove the rainbows and Midtown feels just like Atlanta's other middle-upper class neighborhoods with single family homes nestled closely together, luxury apartment buildings over bars and restaurants, and narrow streets with boldly parked cars. This same homonormativity[21] can be found within Bear, although there are a few caveats.

[21] Homonormativity is defined as the assimilation of queer identities into heteronormative frameworks. Homonormative places, behaviors, actions, and ideologies do no undermine heteronormativity, rather they sustain it by promoting a "good gay" subject that is non-political, isolated to the private realm, and consumptive (Francis 2021) (Duggan 2002, 179).

It is typical to see men in predominantly gender normative clothing like baseball caps, jeans, button down t-shirts, and tennis shoes. Reflecting the demographics of Midtown, most patrons were 30-55 years old and white (although it was not uncommon to see men in their late 20s), an age and racial demographic that could not only afford the cost of Midtown but possess bodies whose presence in the neighborhood would not be questioned. At first glance, Bear seems to be a gathering place for the prototypical "good gay" subject; financially independent, gender conforming, and predominantly white. Despite these normative markers, certain bodily adornments provided some deviation from homonormativity. It is not uncommon to find harnesses, puppy masks, dog tails, collars, and leather hats adorning the bodies of Bear's patrons. One patron told me that the blue silicon dog tail he attached to his lower back would have earned him strange looks at other clubs thus insinuating that Bear had a uniqueness that may transcend homonormative aesthetics. Although leather and puppy play were not the norm at Bear, it was certainly welcomed as seen in the owners' support for the city's weekend long Kink Down South event in June.

However, it is now a hot and humid July evening and Annie and I are trying desperately to keep hold of each other in the sea of polos, harnesses, jeans, fishnet stockings, and palate-clashing cologne. At the back of the dancefloor, we watch as an endless crowd of men are encapsulated in a sensory fog of darkness, lasers, and multi-color lights. The men either dance in closely knit circles or in tight pairs. Regardless of the number of dancers, most dance moves consist of bouncing one's knees and gently swaying to remixed, beat heavy pop anthems.[22]

[22] The music and dance style found at Bear is a possible manifestation of the club's homonormativity. Before the 1980s, many gay clubs utilized Disco, a much more movement oriented and musically diverse choice than the heavy beats and swaying I witnessed. During the panic of the AIDS crises where gender non-conformity was associated with being HIV positive, disco was phased out in favor of electronica and more ridged, pulsing, and supposedly masculine dancing (Peterson 2011).

Suddenly the song “Let’s Have a Kiki” by the Scissor Sisters began to play. Annie excitedly brings my attention to the song and when I remark that I have never heard it before, a look of shock washes upon her face. “Aren’t you gay?!” she remarks with dramatized confusion.

This was not the first time someone was confused by my inability to use the right slang, know the right songs, or – as the vignette from my introductory chapter showcases – wear the right clothes. Although a gay man myself, my “gaydar” was essentially (and if you ask some of my participants, laughably) non-existent. In every way except for my attraction to men, I seemed to fail at performing queerness. Through the process of participant observation, I was exposed to the modes of self-adornment, patterns of consumption, and embodied habits that marked one as queer in one sense or another. I eventually learned to pick up on these codes to a far greater extent than I could in the past. I learned to point out gay men in public, find the rare straight woman at Bear, and see the signs of my sexuality in my childhood memories.

In this chapter I ask the quintessential question, how can you tell they’re gay? My purpose is not to assemble some sort of observational protocol for determining the patterns of one’s eros or libido. Such a project would be laughably unscientific and a flashback to the over-essentialisms that accompanied the deployment of sexuality. My purpose is to identify the kinds of expressive symbols that not only index queer sexuality but are potentially productive of it. What claims about gayness were behind Annie’s assumption that I should know “Let’s Have a Kiki?” What notions of the self are invoked in such a claim? Additionally, in this chapter I purposefully ignore two of the most obvious forms of marking oneself as queer: public displays of affection with someone of the same gender and verbally articulating one’s non-heterosexual identity. I am interested in those symbols that mark someone as queer without something so definitively obvious; the markings of queerness that can be seen from across the room or with

minimal contact. In what follows, I will describe the physical markers of queerness that my participants use as part of a performative weirdo habitus. Next, I will discuss how the weirdo habitus is learned in purposeful moments of expressing one's queerness. Then I will discuss how the retroactive application of this habitus to childhood narratives portray the child as expressing symptoms of an essential weird and queer self. Finally, I will conclude with some reflections on the "vibe" as an embodied sense before discussing how the tensions between American essentialism and weirdo habitus are central to my participants' experiences performing queer sexuality.

## 6.2 The Markers of Queerness

All images featured at the end of these vignettes were created by graphic designer and illustrator Cooper Jasiorkowski.

### *6.2.1 "The Fucking Date"*

It is quite rare to get a spur of the moment request to hang out form Athena but that is precisely what she did in the waning hours of one temperate July day. Athena called to say that her date with a recent Hinge match was canceled and asked if I wanted to meet her and Florence for dinner at a Mexican restaurant near my apartment. Thirty minutes later, I was in the passenger seat of her car squinting my eyes inquisitively at her. Athena is about as easy to read as a doctor's signature, but I think I have become adept at knowing when something is bothering her. Her answers to my questions about her day were bordering on monosyllabic and she was distracted, staring blankly at a four-way stop and allowing later arrivals to proceed through the intersection before her.

"Ok, what's wrong?" I asked, trying to maintain a balance between casualness and sincere sensitivity. Seeming to shake herself awake she drove through the intersection and smiled to herself.

"You know me too well," she teased. "I'll tell you later." The tension slowly started to leave her shoulders and a lose smile landed on her face. By the time we parked in front of an overpriced wine and cheese shop and crossed the street to the Mexican restaurant, the bubbly woman and master conversationalist I knew had returned.

"This is what I was going to wear on the date," she said motioning to her outfit. This is when I realized what a picture she looked covered in whites, blacks, silvers, and golds. She wore black high-top converse that were separated from cuffed, slightly baggie and purposefully ripped white jeans by a thin layer of exposed skin. Her solid black button up t-shirt was tucked into her jeans. She wore no belt. Across her right shoulder and going down to her hips was a black fanny pack. The bag itself was the same deep black as the shirt but stood out through its two gold zippers, one across the top of the bag and one along the front. The zipper heads were also gold and had two small strips of black leather tied to the ends. The fanny pack's strap was white with thin black lines that formed hypnotic concentric diamonds. The two ends of the straps were joined by a black plastic buckle. She wore two leather bracelets on her right hand that alternated in colors from gold to blue to brown. She had two small thick hoop earrings on each ear and a similar piercing on her left nostril. On her neck was a thin gold chain that rested at the end of her clavicles. Her hair hung loosely down her shoulders.

As I took in her outfit Athena commented approvingly on her own attractiveness. On instinct, I took out my phone and began rapidly moving around her, bending my knees up and down to imitate a photographer. Athena laughed and alternated between a few poses. One such

pose struck me as incredibly masculine. Athena moved her shoulders back and crossed her arms in front of her. In her right hand she held her phone, her silver thumb ring and gold index ring shimmering at me. She placed her right hand over her left and positioned them both in front of her pants zipper. The tattoo on her left arm became very prominent in this position. Athena moved her legs apart from each other and leaned slightly to her left. She tilted her head up and pressed her lips together in a tight smile. In this pose her biceps became pronounced and she had an authoritative air to her.

At dinner, Athena explained her choice of clothing. On the first date she dresses feminine. On the second date she dresses feminine but with less makeup. On the third date, the date she was supposed to be on today, she dresses masculine. When I asked why she employed this pattern, she explained that most clothing in her closet was on the feminine side but that the third date is “the fucking date.” On the third date, she wanted to portray the role she hopes to take in the bedroom, dominant and masculine.

*Figure 1: Athena's "Fucking Date" Outfit*

### *6.2.2 Two Women at a Coffee Shop*

Athena and I were resting in a coffee shop after being "bougie" for a day in Virginia Highlands, an upper-class neighborhood east of Midtown. Our version of being bougie consisted of purchasing overpriced iced lattes and wandering in and out of shops filled with merchandise we could not afford. The coffee shop we landed in was a melting pot of aesthetics. Located inside an old brick building, its shiny metallic black tables and chairs contrasted the colorful tile of the front counter. Athena and I sat at a table in front of a large window at the far-right corner of the shop. Two women were seated on the other side of the window at a cast iron table. Both were white and in their early 30s. One was dressed in black biker shorts and a grey tank-top with the strap of a red sports bra peeking out around the collar. Her hair was tied back into a tight braid and a tattoo of vines and flowers climbed up her arm. In front of her was a plastic cup filled with black coffee and a bottle of Gatorade. On the other side of the table was a blond woman in long white pants, sandals, and a tank top. It is the first woman who interested me. At this point in my research, I have begun learning how to identify some people as queer. I'm not sure what it is I am picking up on with this woman, so I turn to Athena.

"That woman, you think she's gay?" I asked.

"Yeah," Athena said without pulling her gaze away from the window.

"How can you tell?" I asked trying to keep one eye on her and another on the woman.

"The tattoos and the way she's sitting." Athena went on to explain that gay women sit in a very relaxed way but added that it is very hard to distinguish between a tomboy, an athlete, and a gay woman. Athena added that the second woman was very beautiful but judging by how she is sitting, she is most likely straight. Both women were leaning back in their chairs and have crossed one leg tightly over the upper thigh of the other. To me, they seemed more or less

identical. Athena explained that the straight woman seemed much more self-conscious about her chest and was generally less relaxed than the gay woman.

*Figure 2: The Two Women Whose Sexuality Athena and I Discussed*

### *6.2.3 Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America*

On a warm August day, I made the arduous trek from Georgia State University's Aderhold Learning Center to the campus library by weaving my way through crowds of students and unevenly paved roads. Crossing the intersection at Hurt Plaza SE and Peachtree Center Ave SE, I noticed a fold out table with a red banner hung across the bottom that read "Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America." The presence of the booth itself is not surprising. This small section of campus is frequented by several student and non-student organizations trying to recruit members. Behind the table stood two men talking to pedestrians and handing out pamphlets next to a cardboard cutout of Bernie Sanders. What intrigued me about the booth was not its content or the life-sized Bernie Sanders, but the two men that I immediately coded as queer. It was out of this interest in my own assumptions that I approached the booth.

The two men were polar opposites and yet both appeared queer to me. Both were white and looked like they were less than 22-years-old. One was in dark blue jeans with a brown belt and a silver chain across his left hip. Clipped onto his front-left beltloop was a carabiner with some keys dangling bellow. He wore a green short sleeve sweater with a long, slithering, blue Chinese dragon on the front surrounded by orange fire. There were two large silver rings on his right index and ring fingers followed by two more on his left index and pinky fingers. He had two thick brown bracelets on each wrist and a silver thin chain with an undiscernible pendant hanging from his neck. His brown, curly hair seemed slightly frizzed by the humidity and the patches of a beard were making their first appearances on his chin and cheeks. By contrast, the man next to him was in all black. Both of his arms were covered in tattoos consisting of thick black lines. His shirt and jeans were a solid black color that matched his short, coiffed hair. Only his facial stubble gave away his true brunette color. He was the taller and more muscular of the pair, taking the lead in talking to me about Democratic Socialism and their organization. As I walked away with a handful of pamphlets, I wondered how these two men, both so diametrically opposed in their styles, appeared queer to me? And to what extent did the political context of their booth play a role?

*Figure 3: The Two Men Staffing the Atlanta Democratic Socialists of America Booth*

### *6.2.4 Combat Boots and Eye Contact*

We had only just arrived at the Airbnb when I decide to sit myself down at the dining room table to fill my notebook with some warm-up observations. This was the first day of Nashville Pride and I was anticipating a great amount of notetaking. The rest of the group was bustling throughout the house, putting away bags or getting dressed for the day. Olivia plopped herself next to me and asked what I was writing. As I explained the purpose of my research and my note taking, Athena joined us and added what she knew about my project. Eventually, Olivia began discussing how she can tell if someone else is queer. Initially, Olivia stated that she struggles to identify someone else's sexuality based on looks, so I pivoted our conversation to how she selected her pride outfit. Olivia explained that she wanted to look "kinda punky" for Pride. She started with the bright pink top that covered her chest and her upper sternum. Although pleased with the top, she wanted to make it "edgier." She added a pair of black jean

shorts and a chain around the right side of her hip. The next step was to add black combat boots with laces in the color scheme of the Lesbian Pride Flag. Finally, she added a series of silver necklaces, earrings, and rings.

"Everything needed to be punky and more queer. Combat boots are very queer." she explained while I frantically scribbled in my notebook.

"How do you know combat boots are queer?" I asked.

"When I got them people talked about them in that way." Olivia added that she purchased the boots because she thought they were cute and punk but later found out about the queer association. "You know they're queer with combat boots," she explained. Athena added that when she is trying to determine if a woman is queer, the first thing she looks at is her clothing and the amount of jewelry she is wearing. Only after noticing these bodily adornments does she pay attention to specific mannerisms like holding a drink from the top of its container.

Eventually the conversation turned to flirting and the kinds of bodily positions queer women employ to flirt. At this point Florence and Alpha joined the conversation and all four women eagerly played off each other's ideas. The group was quick to assert that eye contact is one of the most important things when both flirting with women and determining if they are queer:

**Athena:**
Eye contact.
**Alpha:**
The eye contact.
**Athena:**
That's a huge thing especially with flirting.
**MAC:**
Ok that got brought up a lot.
**Athena:**
Eye contact is a huge thing.
**Olivia:**
Literally.

**Florence:**
I can tell if a girl is gay if she is femme from literally across the bar if like we have a moment.
**Olivia:**
Really?
**Athena:**
Yeah.
**Florence:**
Just like straight up.
**Alpha:**
Catch eyeballs.
**MAC:**
Ok so how is this different from eye contact like if I'm-
**Athena:**
No watch watch.
**Alpha:**
Oh, its different.
**Athena:**
Watch ok so this is me normally. Like hey.

Athena made eye contact with Alpha, her body relaxed and her face deadpan.

**Alpha:**
How you doing?
**Athena:**
And this is me flirting.

Athena leaned forward towards Alpha and crossed her arms in front of her chest. Her right arm was bent so her hand rested on her chin in a thinking position. She quickly looked Alpha up and down with just her eyes. Chuckles broke out from the group and before Florence volunteered to show her version of flirtatious eye contact. Florence looks at Athena quickly before moving her eyes away and smirking while brushing one of her hands through the hair at the top of her head.

**Athena:**
Yeah. If you did that to me I'd be like, queer (chuckles).
**Alpha:**
Was it like the look and then like look away?
**Florence:**
No no no like like the e- the eye just like the smirk with no teeth and like a look.
**Alpha:**
Oh never mind.
**Athena:**

Fixing the hair.
**Alpha:**
Oh yeah the smirk with no teeth I love the smirk with no teeth.
**MAC:**
So OK, it seems like these-
**Athena:**
The licking the lips, which sounds weird like.
**MAC:**
These seem like almost nervous actions looking looking away-
**Florence:**
Yes.
**Athena:**
Yeah.
**Alpha:**
Yes. Essentially we are nervous cause we don't know-
**Florence**:
Right! Yes!
**Alpha:**
We're testing it out.
**Athena:**
We don't know if we are going to get hate crimed (laughter).
**MAC:**
Ok.
**Olivia:**
If someone is not queer, then they could interpret your actions as being nervous as being nervous and then write it off but if they get it they get it.
**Athena:**
Exactly. Which every queer would (laughter).

Olivia interjected to say that similar ways of flirting may occur with straight people. Athena countered with the following.

**Athena:**
Yeah, I will say though. Like if I'm thinking about it like how I flirt with, because I, I flirt with men all the time. Just to be a dick but like like (laughter from group)
**Florence:**
She wants it and she wants attention.
**Athena:**
Yeah 100% but like the way that like I would flirt with a man is wildly different from how I flirt with women.
**MAC:**
OK.
**Florence:**
Very true. Me too.
**Athena:**

So, for example, like if I'm like sitting in a bar, I would to a guy I would show like a part of my leg if I was wearing a skirt. I would not do that for a woman I would go for the eye contact rather, you know and I cause I feel like men are more about like- I don't know that's a generalization.
**MAC:**
OK. Can you do me a favor? I need you to flirt with Alpha again, and then flirt with me so that I get the- (Chuckles from Olivia).
**Athena:**
OK, Alpha is a woman, but he told me that like I flirt like a guy so now I'm self-conscious.
**Alpha**:
You do (MAC laughs).
**Athena:**
Fuck. OK. I'd be like, hey, Alpha. Umm... (laughter from the group).

Athena repeated the same action from earlier.

**Olivia:**
The leaning in (chuckles).
**Athena:**
I yeah yeah.
**Florence:**
I know she does this.

The group broke out into mass, indistinguishable chatter for a few seconds.

**Athena:**
Yes, yeah, yeah I'd be like tell me about yourself and then I'd like make eye contact.
**Alpha:**
That's gay as hell.
**MAC:**
I've seen you do that to people!
**Athena:**
Yeah. And if I'm like, oh, yeah.
**Alpha:**
That's gay.
**Athena:**
But you
**MAC:**
But wait what part were you pointing at there was gay?
**Alpha:**
The whole like- the leaning in.
**Athena:**
The leaning in.
**Alpha:**
Like I know if a girl does that to me I know for sure.

**MAC:**
The arms with the crossing?
**Florence:**
That that could be just flirting.
**Athena:**
Yeah.
**Alpha:**
That's a gay girl.
**Olivia:**
Do y'all sometimes feel like it's in the shoulders?
**Athena:**
Yeah.
**Alpha:**
Yes.
**Athena:**
But with a guy I I wouldn't be like that I'd be like hey yeah like listen and I would like cross my legs do some weird straight shit.

*Figure 4: "Punky" Pride Outfits, Eye Contact, and Body Language with the Nashville Group*

### *6.2.5 "Name One Hero Who Was Happy"*

"See that girl over there?" Annie asked directing my attention to a woman in a leather body suite standing on the other end of Bear's back patio. "I met her when I was getting my hotdogs. She was dressed by her girlfriend. Doesn't she look good?"

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Cindy."

Buoyed by the night's previous drag show and a vodka-cranberry I shouted, "Hey Cindy!" A white brunette woman no older than 25 and dressed in a full body black leather suit turned towards me looking confused. "You look great!" Smiling she came over to the wooden bench Annie and I made into our perch.

"My girlfriend and roommate are having a serious conversation so I'm just gonna give them some privacy." She said as she sat down on the cast iron chair across from us. Cindy was extremely easy to like. She had the constant soft smile of a person who can make anyone feel important. After exchanging pleasantries, I asked where her girlfriend was. She pointed to Jessica, a Latina woman with long black hair in a baseball cap standing next to Lewis, a white man in glasses and a button up t-shirt. Noticing our gaze, the pair joined us at the table and made their introductions. The five of us chatted as the night passes around us. Eventually, I found myself talking with Lewis about his desire to teach music and his experiences with the "queer oasis" of Kennesaw State University. In the middle of our conversation about twinks,[23] Annie asked if I have noticed Lewis's tattoo yet. Directing my attention to Lewis's right arm, I saw a tattoo of two our stretched hands reaching towards each other. One arm is positioned above the other with its palm down, index finger lazily extended in a hook like fashion. The arm on the

[23] Queer slang for a thin, hairless, young gay man who represents one of the body ideals for queer men (Tran et al. 2020, 292-293).

bottom has its palm facing up, index finger extended upwards in the same way as the finger above it. The two hooked fingers are about to meet in a longing touch reminiscent of *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo.

"You have that on your jacket!" Annie was referring to a sweater of mine with two hands in the exact same position. Under it are the words "Name one hero who was happy." The line comes from Madeline Miller's novel, *The Song of Achilles*, which follows the heartbreaking romance of Achilles and Patroclus and went viral over social media a few years ago.

"Song of Achilles?" I asked Lewis.

"Yeah." He said plainly.

"I have like three jackets from that book."

*Figure 5: Lewis' Song of Achilles Tattoo*

## 6.3 Weirdo Codes

Each of the stories embody at least one of physical markers of queerness, the signs my participants use to express their own queer identity or to pick up on the queer identities of others. Throughout these vignettes, three intersecting performative categories emerge: 1) Physical adornments in the form of clothing, tattoos, hair, etc. 2) Patterns of consumption including books, music, video games, etc. 3) Ways of carrying the body including modes of talking, standing, posing, etc. The narratives above are in no way exhaustive of these performative markers. For instance, in our interview Annie described franchises like *Stardew Valley*, *Dr. Who*, and *Dungeons and Dragons* to be particularly queer. Similarly, Fitz associated the popularity of fandoms among queer people as the result of heterosexist society labeling queer folk as "weirdos:"

> You're – you've already been told ohh that that's some weird shit. And so, once you already have crossed into that threshold, you're way more open into seeing well, what other things are am I into? What other quote unquote weirdo things do I feel akin to, right?

Furthermore, many of my participants have attributed queer clothing practices to "alternative" or "punk" scenes and consider these aesthetics among straight people to be a sign that they are, in Lisa's words, "one hell of an ally." Finally, in relation to ways of carrying the body, my notes are littered with descriptions of the prototypical gay accent and the importance of touch during flirtations at Bear. The stories portrayed above are simply those that best communicate these three performative categories.

Also of note is the way these categories interact with each other when performing queer identity. Over the course of my fieldwork several participants would point out people they thought were queer in public. When I asked how they knew a given person was queer, they would normally list items from at least two of the categories above. The expression of any one

trait was insufficient to determine the queer identity of a stranger. Furthermore, the categories above do not necessarily rely on the breaching of gendered norms. Although the presence of nail polish, a high-pitched, nasally voice, and a Britney Spears t-shirt may indicate queerness for a man, so too could muscular arms, a tank-top, and a beard. In his application of Michel Maffesoli's theories on temporal unions and aesthetics to an Australian gay bar, Sean Slavin discusses how the aesthetic codes expressed among the bar's patrons are not strict prescriptions but frameworks within which people may play to express shared identity. These codes are less of an allegiance to an aesthetic ideal as they are a rejection of dominant aesthetics (Maffesoli 1996; Slavin 2004, 281). The lose aesthetic framework my participants play within is one that embodies a general sense of weirdness. The muscular queer man might be wearing a tank top that is a little too tight, too colorful, or has an obscure reference that only the members of a certain fandom would understand. In the examples above, all the aesthetic codes embody strangeness on some level. Staffing a socialist booth in a predominately conservative state, wearing combat boots and other punk symbols, using special forms of eye contact, subtly crossing gender norms by appearing too relaxed or leaning in during a flirtatious encounter, and tattooing oneself with a queer literary reference are all playful aesthetic codes that are just strange enough to be (although not necessarily overtly) queer.

This is not to say that more obvious expressions are not present. Gender play and rainbow flags are certainly leveraged by my participants, but the examples above display more subtle forms of strangeness that fly under the heterosexist radar while being obvious to other queer folk. These forms of expression are not unique to the 2020s. Indeed, the interaction of 1970s queer and punk symbols has already been discussed by Tavia Nyong'o (2008). Similarly, David Johnson (2021) has argued that early 1950's gay pictural magazines were discernable from their

heterosexual bodybuilding counterparts through the bulges, smiles, and apparent camaraderie of their models, slight yet significant divergences in conventional gendered behaviors. What can be found in the aesthetic codes of rainbow flags and combat boots is the emergence of weirdo habitus and thus a queerness as weirdness.

I find that performativity and habitus play off each other quite well when describing how social forces are embedded in individual subjects. Just as discourses shape a subject's performances and the subject themselves, so too does habitus represent the subject's dispositional embodiment of experiences within a social field (Bourdieu 1990, 53-54). For example, clothing choices that are considered masculine and worn by a masculine subject are not masculine in of themselves but are defined by the discourses that surround the subject, shape the subject, define their actions, and are reproduced by those actions. Similarly, the masculine subject's embodied knowledge of their social world, including experiences with gendered discourses and regulatory regimes, imbues them with a set of dispositions that are considered masculine by those gendered discourses and regulatory regimes. For my participants, the expression of queerness is based on a set of embodied dispositions (habitus). Those embodied dispositions rely on discourses that define queerness and thus create the social field in which habitus is formed. Thus, a unified theory of habitus and performativity sees discourses as part of the social field in which habitus is learned and a subject's performances as catalyzed by habitus. When those performances are understood as indexing queerness by an observer, those discourses are reaffirmed and reproduced (although certainly with some alterations). Thus, the expression and reading of habitus is a kind of performance. But where are these discourses learned? And how do they become embodied?

## 6.4 Learning To Be by Wanting to Be

The habitus of the weird is not some ethereal embodied sense that one gains after coming out; some sort of dispositionary gay card mailed to one's home after their first pride event. Like any other habitus it is gained through experience in the field. As the opening vignette of this chapter indicates, I seemed to have missed some sort of gay class. This research project was the first time I engaged in social settings that were predominantly queer. A major site of my learning how to be queer did not come from dates, boyfriends, or even social media but from those I befriended over the course of this research. One pivotal example is the selection of my own pride outfit. The week before heading to Nashville Pride I had no clue what was appropriate for me to wear. Sending over screenshots of the first things I saw on Amazon under the search term "Pride, Men" to Athena, I wondered if I had anything remotely rainbow in my apartment. Athena called me soon after receiving the text.

"Ok… you can wear what you want but I wouldn't recommend that stuff. It's very baby gay." I knew enough to recognize that term "baby gay," someone who is recently (and obnoxiously) out of the closet. Starting to panic, I begged for her help. Athena directed me towards black clothing with small rainbow-colored accents and short silver chain necklaces. With her help, I settled on a pair of black sweat-shorts with a thin rainbow-colored band on the end of each leg, a black t-shirt, a black button-up dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a short silver chain necklace. I was essentially monochrome except for that thin rainbow-colored band. I was a cross between something slightly punk, slightly frat-boy, and slightly gay. Although I did not see many attendees at Nashville Pride dressed in black (most likely due to the sunny sky and 90-degree weather), I did see many embody this same kind of weirdness in their outfits. I saw men in shorts that were a little too short but not short enough to comment on.

Women wore rainbow-colored outfits but in more pastel hues and without the strict red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet order of the pride flag. Church fans and signs reading “Y’all Means All” were sold to people in pink cowboy hats; symbols of The South becoming queer adornments under the gaze of the Tennessee Capital Building.

Declarations like “that’s gay” or “look how gay” also served as a major source of my enculturation. However, being the nosy ethnographer I am, I would almost always follow these statements with the question, “What’s gay about it?” often to the annoyance of whoever I am with. In one such instance, I was at Athena’s house watching her and Sasha get ready for Second Friday. Athena, having just woken up from a nap and needing to find an outfit, was rummaging through the walk-in closet on the fair end of her bathroom. Sasha was standing at the sink located next to closet and was meticulously applying mascara. I was sitting on the edge of the bathtub at the other end of the bathroom from Athena. Eventually, Athena pulled out what she called “the masculine option.” She held up a black button-up shirt with a black sports bra under it. At the bottom of the sports bra was a thin rainbow elastic band. Sasha took a break from her makeup to ponder the outfit.

“I like it,” says Sasha, “it’s very gay.”

“What makes it gay?” I ask. Sasha explained that the gayness of the outfit was not isolated to the rainbow band of the bra but included the bra being black, the button up shirt being black, and that Athena was going leave the leave the shirt open to reveal the bra. Athena put the outfit back and pulled out a pastel rainbow-colored top with an open back. Sasha looked at me through the mirror and smiled.

“What makes it gay?” She asked. “Is it the rainbow?”

Granted the rainbow band may be self-evident for Sasha, Athena, and even any heterosexual onlooker. However, it is the self-evident nature of the sports bra, its exposure, its black color, the black button-up shirt that would have surrounded it, and its association with masculinity that points to weirdo habitus. Athena's outfit is not entirely one thing nor another. In the outfit, her breasts would have been highlighted – as they typically are in her more feminine Second Friday outfits – but they are surrounded by a black button-up shirt, something that I wore to Nashville Pride a month earlier. In this way her outfit was not entirely conventionally feminine nor conventionally masculine. Indeed, a similar clothing aesthetic can be found at Bear among larger men in unbuttoned shirts and harnesses meant to accentuate their chests. Her outfit was neither too masculine, too feminine, too punk, too gay, too athletic, too clubby, or even too unique. It's simply weird and simply queer.

One final example from that night can be seen in Appendices K and L. These earrings were for sale next to the dance floor at Second Friday. At a close glance, one can see earrings in the shape of marijuana leaves, cigarettes, naked women's bodies, gummy bears, bubble wands, alien heads, and even vibrators (that, to the delight of everyone in our group, worked). All of these can be considered weird at some level. The counter-cultural connotation of marijuana and cigarettes, the presence of nudity and female sexuality, even the use of children's toys are not themes to be found in an average jewelry store. Nor would they necessarily be found on just anyone walking the streets of Atlanta. By simply being at Second Friday, these earrings were not just catering to a weird/queer woman aesthetic but were productive of that aesthetic. By selling these weird objects in a queer space, queerness and weirdness became related. Any patron who purchased or even found amusement in these earrings was both acquiring, expressing, and reproducing this queer/weird connection thus making their habitus a performative act. As such,

within the aesthetics of weirdness there is a kind of normalization. These earrings are strange in the sense that outside queer islands like Second Friday or Bear they would be out of place. Yet it is that unified out-of-placeness that makes them the norm within those spaces. Indeed, there were moments where the straightness of someone at Bear or Second Friday was apparent because they appeared "too normal" due to an aesthetic presentation that would have been perfectly acceptable almost anywhere else.

The aesthetic codes discussed in this section are purposefully taken on, a habitus that is intentionally and consciously leveraged and learned in the goal to appear queer. However, the connection between strange and queer through performing a habitus does add an interesting contradiction to the previous chapter. If these codes are learned, as all habitus is, how do they interact with the essentialist paradigms held so closely by my participants?

### 6.5 Weird Child, Queer Child

As previously discussed, American essentialism is an idealized discursive regime that is defined by a belief in a person's individual, innate, unchanging, essentialized, "true" from which emotions spring forth. This self is in constant danger of corruption and pollution from the world it inhabits. As last chapter's portrayal of Fitz and Antonio's childhood toys showcase, patterns of consumption were often interpreted in my participants' childhood narratives as signs of an emerging essentialist queer self. Ambi's childhood narratives articulate how these early patterns of consumption often involved the crossing of gender norms. When Ambi was around seven or eight years old, he befriended a neighborhood boy,

> And basically, I just was kind of, like, turned on by him. Like, I don't even, it was an attraction or something like I liked him. Like, it was just like this little crush. And I was looking at him. We were playing and I'm like, oh, he's just so cool and cute and I I felt differently with him than I felt with a a girl in my neighborhood I used to play with […] And so basically I'm older now, so I could look back and know exactly what that moment was. But it was that I knew I was gay […] I had a crush on him for a minute as well as it

> was natural to me. It wasn't weird that I liked this boy. It wasn't weird to me that you know nothing. I I kind of skipped over this part, but we actually ended up kissing. I think I pushed it on or like I was being I don't know what I was doing. We were playing. I was just touching him. And like we were wrestling or something and we just, I I can remember kissing him and I just had to follow through with the mindset that I thought because I'm like you know I like I feel something for him or something. So so I'm going to follow through with this kiss and that confirmed it […] I'm sure I'm sure I exploited him, and you know, helped him discover that when we were kids because he was- It's not like I I don't want to say I seen gay in him too, but he wasn't a tough boy kid. He was sensitive like me and had a certain touch. So, it's like we basically clinged to each other with that and it was easier for both of us to deal with that moving forward as friends, because he's like, he's like becoming aware that I like him in a way or that like we did something weird. But yeah, it's OK to him […] Yeah, it's funny because I was really young, but everything is still visible. Like I said, I can still see it and then as in like I said as adult now I can go back and identify everything now because I know the right terms and I I mean I know it. And so yeah, I know I was very young. I knew it. I was comfortable with it, and I just was ready to do it at a young age that, like, just be gay and, you know, I had someone that was open to it, and making it easier because he really made it easier compared to a lot of other male friends that I had that we were young and they would look at me weird if I wanted to play with their sisters. Like, why do you want to play with her she a girl like, come do the boy stuff, come play basketball, you know? But with him, it was like we're OK we're we're just chilling. We play however we want. We play doctor. I would play the female. Sometimes he would play the female. It was fun. It wasn't just gender constricted. So, yeah.

What makes Ambi's encounter with this boy so interesting is not their actual kiss, but the reasons Ambi has for explaining why he felt close with him in the first place. This boy had a "certain touch" and was comfortable playing games and using toys that required the crossing or negation of gender norms. In Ambi's recollection of this event, what made this boy safe to kiss, or perhaps even desirable, was the same consumptive patterns that he now interprets as indicative of queer sexuality. Although Ambi did not flesh out what he meant by a "certain touch" or "I don't want to say I seen gay in him too, but he wasn't a tough boy kid," these comments may indicate a retroactive identification of a queer hexis. As Ambi says, "I'm older now, so I could look back and know exactly what that moment was." Indeed, although patterns of consumption were the most popular in narratives of childhood queer performativity, hexis was also fairly significant. Art recalls being asked by a childhood friend to look at her nails. When

she raised her right arm in front of her and extended her fingers vertically the friend said "'No, no that's that's-' he either said like, 'the gay way' or like 'the girl way to look at your nails'" indexing a kind of hexis that violated gender norms.

Often gender crossing performances were the grounds for ostracization and bullying. Unlike the use of combat boots or the subtly of eye contact, these actions were taken as signs of a queer identity by supposedly straight schoolmates. While talking about his early childhood and education, Fitz told me:

> Everyone knew I was gay like really early on, like before I even knew what being gay was. They just all kind of was like that one he, he homo and I was like ok word so. Ohh I had a lot of girlfriends growing up, but I didn't have as many guy friends growing up and the guy friends who were friends with me, it was kind of this like yeah, he's different. We like it. And then the other guys who didn't like me was like, oh, he's different. We don't like it. And and so my my like position in the caste system that is school was decided before I even knew it. And but I was vibing with it. I was like, yeah, whatever. This is just how things go. This is how we function so. I don't have a lot of bad memories from them, I don't think.
> **MAC:**
> At what age did you realize that they kind of pinpointed you as the gay kid?
> **Fitz:**
> Six. Yeah. Well, I knew when I was four. And then when I was six was the first time I went to white kids' school. And the older kids would say things about me being gay. And at first I was confused because I I didn't realize what the word gay meant gay. I thought like the word gay was the word gay was like the N word like, you know, you can like guys, but if someone's trying to say a slur like I thought it was basically fag, gay was that and so. I would be like I'm not gay. How dare you? That's so mean. That's so rude. And I would like talk about liking boys like 2 seconds later so like. I don't know if it was like a chicken or the egg situation, like if I kind of added myself or like if they kind of just picked it out.
> **MAC:**
> Right, right, right. OK. So growing up when you were young, you would talk about liking boys?
> **Fitz:**
> Ohh yeah, OK uh-huh. 100% my like the way that my first kiss happened. I was four years old and like we were playing house and I like explicitly told a guy that I wanted to play the wife. Like it, I guess we were too young to care for it was like, yeah, sure. Whatever. I think he liked me too, because like, he used to share his crayons with me. And he was like, really open to being my husband. So, like, I'm convinced we were like lovers. I don't know where he is now, unfortunately.
> **MAC:**

You should track him down.

**Fitz:**

Yeah, I need to. I don't remember his name. I remember that he wore, like, matching track suits every day. Hmm. I think it was just like I don't. I don't remember a phase in my life of I think I have a different coming out story because I never came out. I don't remember like a phase in my life of ever being anything other than like flaming homosexual.

**MAC:**

Yeah. Oh, so was that the first instance where that was like, a cognitive thing? Where, Oh, I like boys?

**Fitz:**

No, the first time I knew I was like at the same preschool. And ironically speaking, we were watching Who Framed Roger Rabbit? And it's the scene where Jessica Rabbit is like doing a performance at, like this like snazzy jazz speakeasy and she's dancing and she's doing her thing. And I don't know how I did this, but like, mentally, I could, like, see on frame. My brain is erasing her from the shot like I'm literally like my tiny brain is really erasing this figure of female sensuality from the scene. And I am just hyper fixating on like all the men in the scene, like just zeroing in on all of them. And I didn't have like the language to say, oh, this is homosexuality. But I remember thinking to myself, like, cause, you know, kids know what, like a husband and a wife is right. Hmm. So, I remember, like, thinking to myself around that happening that like if I was going to have one at some point in the future, it would be a husband. Like, I I would never have a wife that doesn't sound correct?

Like Ambi, Fitz's narrative focuses on the violation of gendered norms as signs queer identity. Fitz wanted to play the wife, to possess the magnetism of Jessica Rabbit and, as he later told me, play the female characters in video games. In his desire to embody Jessica Rabbit and play the wife, one can insinuate the application of queer hexis in his childhood narrative. Likewise, in his choice of video game characters and last chapter's mention of his proclivity for Brats dolls and the Strawberry Shortcake movie, one can see the see the application of queer consumptive patterns. Both these forms of queer habitus are what marked him as strange to his classmates, either to his benefit or to his detriment.

One other dimension must be added to this depiction of queer performativity in essentialist childhood narratives. Other than Annie, these stories were told by individuals who were raised to be boys/men. The women in my study also interpreted their childhood narratives

with signs of an essential queer self but most of these centered around relationships rather than a queer habitus. For instance, Athena attributed her fascination with her female teachers to be a sign of her queerness. Similarly, Lisa saw her queer identity in the possessiveness she felt over her childhood friends. She also understood this to be common experience for queer women in general. Although seen as strange in their own right, they did not carry the same obviousness to others as playing with Brats dolls or looking at one's nails incorrectly. Tanya was the only exception to this rule although she did not explicitly tie the childhood harassment she experienced to gender nonconformity like Ambi or Fitz.

Furthermore, most of the men I interviewed in this study consider themselves to be more feminine than other men. Even Tanya considers herself a "masc" or masculine lesbian. It could be that these childhood narratives are representative of the essentialist need to point to and thus construct an individual, innate, unchanging, essentialized, and "true" self specifically for those who regularly cross gender norms. My other participants do not have the same experience with gender and thus may not interpret their childhoods in this way. Alternatively, the very absence of gender play in the childhood narratives of my gender conforming participants may index the same essentialist narrative pattern, the assumption and creation of a stable, unchanging gendered affinity. Regardless of being gender-conforming or transgressing, the childhood narratives of my participants do all generally point in one direction: a tale of a "strange" child who, remaining true to their essential self, grew into a queer adult by finding and learning from others just like them.

### 6.6 Conclusion: "It's just a vibe"

The physical markers of queer performance are part of what I call weirdo habitus which can color childhood narratives to maintain a consistent essential queer self. Furthermore, this

weirdo habitus is acquired in moments of wanting to appear queer. I must emphatically stress that the performance of queer identity is not marked by some sort of explicit calculation. There is no formula my participants to utilize when selecting a queer outfit, when talking with a gay accent, when making eye contact, or when selecting a video game character. Likewise, there is no formula for assessing someone's queerness. When my participants describe someone as queer, they do not sum a designated set of performances to arrive at their conclusion. Instead, my participants would often describe their knowledge of someone's queerness as being based on a "vibe," an indescribable feeling, an embodied sense that defies articulation, "a little flutter in the chest" as Lisa says. Often it was my probing into "what makes it gay?" that required a kind of slowing down and a pointing to the concrete markers a scientific study demanded. This is a process I forced upon myself as well. There were several instances when I would mark a stranger on the other side of a train car, across the street, in a classroom, or in a restaurant as queer almost as soon as I saw them. I had to remind myself to slow down and try and dissect the material markers that were leading to my interpretation. What my experience and my participants' descriptions of a "vibe" indicate is that habitus is not just an embodied disposition but an embodied sense. Just as a reader can follow the narrative of a novel without having to sound out every letter, so too can a queer person identify the queerness of someone else without explicit calculation.

Perhaps it is appropriate that identifying someone or presenting oneself as queer defies any clear cut and consistent articulation. If queerness is weirdness, the realities of detecting queerness should be equally strange. In a classic performative pattern, these weird performances create discourses of queerness as anything but monolithically describable, something very much in line with Eve Sedgewick's definition of queer (1993, 7). Thus, for any action to be considered

queer it must be strange in some way. To not be strange, to not blur lines through one's actions would be, in one form or another, a kind of straightness. I believe the following conversation with Fitz encapsulates the relationship between queerness and weirdness better than I could in a thousand pages:

> **Fitz:**
> So, when you straight, right? You don't consider like I feel like straight men don't consider like what is their role in friendship or what is their role as a person? Like who are they, how do they perform their identity, that sort of thing. When you're queer, you intrinsically fit outside of a norm, is kind of like you slightly hit the um... you slightly hit things. And once you go down that hill, you're already going down that hill is what makes you question other things, right?
> **MAC:**
> Can you give me some examples of what you're talking about?
> **Fitz:**
> Yeah. For sure. So like, I think the way that I got dressed right, I'm wearing a crop top it's kinda leather, right? I was like way more aware of the fact that that could be read as sexual or that could be read as like the kind of person that I'm wanting, the kind of guy that I kinda want, or like how I want to be a sexiness kind of thing, right?
> **MAC:**
> Right.
> **Fitz:**
> A straight man would not put something on and be that aware of what that would insinuate. Because straight men aren't asked to ask about their identity, because they are already the default, right? They're already the binary.
> **MAC:**
> So, by dressing this way, you're kind of, you're expressing that you're outside of the defaults?
> **Fitz:**
> I wouldn't say that I'm just expressing it as much as I'm aware of how it could be read. I'm aware of the fact that like the way that I am dressing could be different because I'm already intrinsically different. So, I had to learn how those differences are read. You know, like when you're queer and you want to express yourself, your al- like you think of all these queer people like David Bowie, whatever. I think- I don't think it's by accident that they look different, right? *Because to be queer is inherently to be different, to be weird. And so, you want to express that externally. And so, when you're queer, you kind of learn the tricks of the trade of how to dress and express yourself in a way that is not normal.* [emphasis added by author.]

The emphasized line above embodies the central tension of this thesis. The folding of queer sexuality into American essentialism and the acquisition of weirdo habitus seem contradictory.

How can something that is legitimized as part of the essence all subjects supposedly possess still be strange? How can something innate and unchanging still be learned? Yet it is precisely these tensions that characterize the experience of performing queer sexuality in the metro-Atlanta area. Furthermore, when placed within the heterosexist realities of the United States, these performative tensions can be seen as adaptations to a broader necropolitical landscape.

# 7 CONCLUSION

## 7.1 Questioning the Necessity of Sexuality

Over the course of this research, I sought to investigate the experience of performing queer sexuality in the metro-Atlanta area. During my five-month long period of ethnographic fieldwork, I came to understand that experienced as characterized by tensions between American essentialism and weirdo habitus. These tensions are the product of political-economic histories which have deployed and re-deployed sexuality and its attached notions of selfhood since the advent of capitalism. It bears remembering that the deployment of sexuality, its associated disciplinary apparatus, and its contemporary manifestations in neoliberalism are part of an inherently exploitive history. Essentialized subjects were created to facilitate their alienation, speciation, and dispossession. Thus, one of the ways that capitalism is reproduced is in how the self is learned, experienced, sensed, and lived. To possess an essentialized self is to reproduce the systems of exploitation that construct and rely on that essentialized self. T*o be* within a capitalist world is to reproduce that capitalist world.

Although I stand by this historic interpretation, I struggle with the idea of leveraging it to pass judgment on those living within capitalism, my participants and myself included. What I hope comes through in the stories explored above is the joy, humor, and self-reflection that is involved in the performance of queer sexuality. Observing and experiencing the tensions between an exploitative and yet joyous ethnopsychological paradigm was one of the great headaches of my research. I continually asked myself, is sexuality needed? If its roots are in capitalist exploitation, is there not a moral imperative to do away with it? I was not alone in this line of questioning. In fact, Ernest was a major source of inspiration for my theoretical quagmire.

At the end of our interview, I asked Ernest if he thought there would ever be a time where the closet was irrelevant. With his calm, analytical tone Ernest responded:

> Seems very utopian, doesn't it? Yeah, I don't know. I would like to think so. And I struggle a lot with I mean, even a dichotomy I've already kind of danced around, which is that in one sense, I don't want my sexuality to be my entire identity but then in another sense, well it's a huge part of who I am and who I've become and how I will continue to be. So, in other words, appears, unavoidable. And in the same way I kind of struggled with culture that is, in lots of wonderful ways exploring identities. And we have all these different names and labels. But then another part of me wonders if that's a good thing. During grad school I was reading a lot about, I guess, just like the history of sexuality. And it's kinda turning point from when same-sex activities or like just sex itself was homosexuality. And then later how it became an identity.
> **MAC:**
> You know your Foucault?
> **Ernest:**
> Yeah. Yeah. And **[interrupted from someone off screen]** I'm in a meeting. Sorry. Yeah. Foucault. Yeah. And then he points to like the Oscar Wilde trial. Um, and yeah, so I struggled with that. I'm like, "Okay, couldn't we just all have sex with whoever we want to and not have to have a label on it?" It's tough.

In what follows, I desperately and naively try to answer that question "couldn't we just all have sex with whoever we want to and not have to have a label on it?" Essentially *should* and *could* sexuality be dismantled?

Answering this question is not simply an act of theoretical daydreaming but an attempt to retroactively infuse Marxist and intersectional queer praxis into my thesis. By Marxist praxis, I am specifically invoking an ethical orientation towards the acquisition of knowledge for the purpose of social critique and change (McGuire, O'Donovan, and Wurst 2005, 356). Furthermore, I am leveraging intersectional queer praxis' emphasis on slow scholarship, that is resistance to the neoliberal university's insistence on fast-paced research through pauses for reflection and dialog (Mehrotra 2023, 558). The aim of this conclusion is not to propose a plan for the dismantlement of sexuality, the usurpation of capitalism, or the complete re-working of notions of self in the United States. Rather it serves as a kind of imagining, a queer futurity

(Muñoz 2019) that acknowledges the political-economic history of the United States to question compulsory heterosexuality, the entire regime of sexuality, and its supposed inevitability in hopes of conjuring up new potentials without taking an inflexible stance. At the end of this theoretical exercise, I will argue that the dismantlement of sexuality is not a simple and feasible net positive goal. Furthermore, I will argue that "adding more letters" so to speak onto the political identity of LGBTQ+ may provide a useful, if limited, strategy to mitigate the adverse impacts of sexuality.

### 7.2 Queerness and Death

Any discussion on the contemporary consequences of sexuality and thus the questioning of its right to exist would be sorely lacking without acknowledgment of queer suicide. As previously discussed, life in the closet can be defined by autonomous pollution (Douglas 2002, 169) – the intense anxiety that comes from private thoughts transgressing ritually communicated norms and values. An expansion of this initial discussion may prove useful. Queer people not only experience anxiety from private transgressions of public norms but are seen by heterosexist society as matter out of place. Their very existence crosses lines of legible gender and challenges the forces of compulsory heterosexuality by throwing the "naturalness" of the heterosexual couple, an entity that heterosexist society considers essential for literal and metaphorical reproduction, into question (Ahmed 2014, 144). It is through the same ordinary rituals in which the closeted subject develops their autonomous pollution – such as Olivia's perspective on family events or Cohler's depiction of contact sports (2009, 285) – that out subjects develop an awareness, and at times belief in, their persistent unbelonging in society. To be queer is to be out of place and exists in a landscape characterized by the ebbs and flows of outright rejection, political conjecture, violence, conditional acceptance, and resistance.

The daily reminds of this out of place existence are not lost on my participants. For many of them, their earliest recollections of queer folk originate in ordinary and derogatory comments from friends and family. Several are still perturbed by the permitted homophobia of their extended relatives. Alpha and Lewis have expressed concern over the future of their careers as child educators in a world where the queer teacher has been and continues to be seen as a predator. Several passive comments made during the Nashville Pride trip also displayed my participants' understanding of queerness as out-of-placeness. While searching for food with Meg, I listened as an announcer stood on a large stage within view of the Tennessee State Capital to proclaim that "our art is not a crime" in reference to Tennessee House Bill 30 (an attempted ban on drag shows in public places and in the presence of minors). I shared relief with Athena and Florence when the confederate flags and Christian billboards of Northern Georgia/Southern Tennessee were faded out by the pride flags and progressive signage of Atlanta and Nashville. I experienced the mixed tension, relief, and apprehension that came with tall chain linked fences and dozens of police officers that surrounded the pride event. My fellow attendees and I felt relatively protected and yet frightened by the increased police presence and the threats its existence insinuated. Reminders of out-of-placeness are unavoidable for queer folk in heterosexist America.

I argue that this affect of out-of-placeness is the crux for the well documented disproportionate rates of suicide among queer folk compared to their heterosexual counterparts. For instance, The Trevor Project found that 44% of LGBTQ+ youth in the US South contemplated suicide in 2021 (The Trevor Project 2021, 1). Another study utilizing data from the CDC's National Violent Death Reporting System found that LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 21 and 25 are three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts

(Patten et al. 2021, 523, 526). Another study on suicide rates since President Trump's inauguration found a 7% increase in suicides for queer men following the Trump inauguration compared to a 5% decrease in suicides for heterosexual men. The researchers attribute this trend to the increase in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and rhetoric following the election, a pattern that echoes the increase in institutionalized stigma during the AIDS pandemic (Ream 2022, 610, 612). These trends continue outside of the United States to other heterosexist settler-colonies. A 2014 Canadian study found suicide to be a leading cause of death in gay Canadian men even surpassing contemporary deaths caused from HIV/AIDS. That same study also found that gay and bisexual Canadian men were four times more likely to die from suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Hottes et al. 2014, 513-515). Finally, in Australia, where suicide is the leading cause of death for people ages 15-44, 32.7% of LGBTQ+ individuals contemplated suicide in 2021 while 3.9% of individuals attempted suicide, both higher than the rates for heterosexual individuals (Lyons et al. 2021, 522, 527). Although no one over the course of my study indicated that they were contemplating suicide, I do know that 5/13 of my participants struggled with suicidal ideation at some point in their lives. Furthermore, my participants never discussed suicidal ideation at length and thus its roots to out-of-placeness cannot be certain, but its more than insignificant presence among my participants speaks to the findings above. But how does out-of-placeness link itself to suicide? How does unbelonging become death? It is here that a discussion of perennial liminality is useful.

Borrowing from Arnold van Gennep (1909) and Victor Turner's (1967) work on rites of passage and liminality, ethnographers have studied the experience of what can be called perennial liminality, an extended transitionary state where a return to the pre-liminal is impossible and the post-liminal is cruelly optimistic – that is, unreachable yet impossible to give

up (Alexander-Nathani 2021; Gregg, Seigworth, Berlant 2011). Terry Williams (2017) and Anne Allison (2012) make the connection between perennial liminality and suicide in their respective ethnographic works. For Williams, his teenage participants struggling with suicidal ideation experienced a great conflict that dramatically altered their lives and has proven to be impossible to resolve. Suicide is thus an "ongoing expression of the conflict between the self and an exterior imposition… a confession of anger, angst, disgust with life as it is lived…" between the irrecoverable past and an unobtainable future (2017, xxx-xxxii). Similarly, Allison, although not directly tying suicide rates in Japan to rites of passage, has noted that her participants struggling with suicidal ideation are trapped in the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood by market capitalism's permutation into everyday life (2012). Within this framework, suicide is not a pathogenic anomaly but an effect and potential adaption to larger sociocultural forces that keep individuals entrapped within perennial liminality, that is an unsustainable existence created by a crisis that has no resolution. (Honkasalo and Tuominen 2014, 2-6). Queer suicide can be interpreted with the same lens. The realization of one's non-heterosexual identity becomes a kind of crises moment, a death of a presumed heterosexual self to which one cannot return. The desired and yet unreachable post-liminal of a destigmatized reality is equally unobtainable and it is existence within the perennial liminality of unceasing out-of-placeness that is unbearable. To some, so unbearable that suicide becomes a strategy for resistance and escape. It is the political implications of queer suicide, however, that deserves particular attention and reveals the performative power of death.

In the application of out-of-placeness to the phenomenon of queer suicide, sexuality – while being relatively harmless to some – becomes disastrously necropolitical to others. Necropolitics is described as the ability to determine who must live and who must die as the

mark of sovereignty and a mechanism for social control (Mbembé 2003; Yilmaz and Erturk 2023, 9; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 66). Within this framework, the suicides, beatings, deaths, and fears of queer folk within the United States maintain the very compulsory heterosexuality that has catalyzed those necropolitical conditions. Through the relative silence around these deaths, fears, and their ordinary positions in queer lives, queer folk are framed as "[no] more than failed heterosexuals, heterosexuals who have failed 'to be'" and thus subjects whose deaths are unremarkable because they are already (socially) dead (Ahmed 2014, 156). For if they were ever truly alive, these statistics would cause horror, outrage, and state mobilization. The state indifference/contribution to queer suicide – embodied in mountains of legislation aimed at removing the queer subject from schools, libraries, bathrooms, and children – is a modern specter of the state's complacency during the AIDS pandemic. In classic necropolitical fashion, to be heterosexual is to be alive (or worthy of living) while to be queer is to be dead (or worthy dying/killing). The queer person must be placed in proximity to death so the heterosexual person's right to exist is maintained.

The acceptance and bolstering of queer death by the United States exists because the physical or psychological destruction of each queer body maintains the supposed naturalness of the productive heterosexual couple. This is the performative power of queer death. The suffering of the queer subject is seen as the product of their own innate "wrongness" compared to the heterosexual subject's innate "rightness." In reality, it is the marking of the queer as "wrong" that allows for the heterosexual to be seen as "right" in the first place. Thus, the Foucauldian legacy of standardizing desire by expulsing the deviant still holds strength today. In classic Durkheimian fashion (1960), the criminal has been punished to reinforce the norm. In Douglas' view (2002), the bodily manifestation of dirt has been removed and the schematic categories remain stable.

For Goffman (1986), the stigma ideology has maintained the discreditable nature of the stigmatized, leaving the status of the normal unquestioned. To Ahmed (2014), the social ideal of life has been achieved. Regardless of the theorist, death is a necessary part of sexuality as it maintains the ideation of productive desires, bodies, and disciplines through the systemic elimination of the deviant, the strange, and the queer. As such, a reasonable assertion is that sexuality *should* be dismantled out of a fundamental respect for human life. However, this assertion would only be self-evident if my participants were passive within the necropolitical landscape.

### 7.3 Adaptions to the Necropolitical Landscape

My participants' incorporation of queerness into American essentialism and their development of weirdo habitus are adaptations to the necropolitical landscape they inhabit. In performing an essential queer self, my participants are framing queer subjects as essentially the same as heterosexual ones thus challenging the legitimacy of queer death. The successful deployment of essentialized queerness is not only seen in the previous chapters' vignettes but can be found in political statements supporting trans Americans. In the aftermath of Georgia Senate Bill 141, Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens took to Instagram to announce his support for the trans community by saying, "across the country we are seeing a push against the transgender community to eliminate the fundamental right to simply be who they are" (City of Atlanta LGBTQ Affairs 2023). Similarly, a news story on the death (and potential murder) of Nex Benedict, a 16-year-old trans student from Oklahoma who died at home after receiving several head injuries from student-assailants at school, features the following headline: "Oklahoma banned trans students from bathrooms. Now a bullied student is dead after a fight. Nex Benedict died one day after a fight in a school bathroom. Their mother, Sue Benedict, tells Bevan Hurley

that the gender fluid teenager endured more than a year of abuse simply for being who they were." Later in the article, Nex's mother is quoted as saying "you've got to be strong and look the other way, because these people don't know who you are" (Hurley 2024). Words like "who they are" index American essentialism in a highly impactful, heart wrenching way that insinuates the supposedly self-evident argument that whoever this person claims to be is legitimate as their selfhood is part of the shared ethnopsychological paradigm. In these examples the language of American essentialism is literally resisting necropolitical reality by marking queerness as matter *in* place, by driving a process of normalization where queerness is one potential form of the essence all people possess.

The weirdo habitus developed by my participants is another adaptation to the necropolitical landscape of queer existence. The use of aesthetic codes to mark others as queer has a long history but what is perhaps most profound is its ability to denote safety. Knowing if someone is queer or "one hell of an ally" is more than simply indexing commonalities but identifying a safe person, place, or object. Likewise, the assumed opposites of these codes index a dangerous person, place, or object. Throughout my fieldwork, I got the impression of an imagined enemy that my participants collectively construct. Most of the time the imagining takes place through jokes. For instance, on the way back from Nashville Pride Tanya pointed out a billboard beckoning drivers to call the displayed phone number and discover the "truth" about what is right and wrong via the Holy Bible. Tanya suggested that we call the number and pretend to be some distressed, lost soul that was molested at Nashville Pride. Her suggestion was met with laughter all around, but the humor did not simply rest in the absurdity of the suggested action. It rested in the absurdity that someone on the other end of the line might believe it. In making such a joke, Tanya is disempowering what she perceives as heterosexist logics embedded

in North Georgian Evangelical Christianity which paint Pride and, by extension, queer folk as innately perverse. Similarly, comments about straight men litter my fieldnotes. Poking fun of supposedly straight men's music choices, their inability to dress, straight male privilege, and frustrations around their sexualization of women, especially queer women, were not uncommon conversation topics. Often these complaints portray straight men as hypocritical, lacking in critical thought, immensely privileged, and dangerously homophobic. Taken together, an impression of a shared and imagined enemy emerged: a straight man of almost any age who votes Republican and practices some form of Christianity.

Ironically, most instances of homophobia that my participants shared with me do not involve this character. Instead, they center around parents and classmates who may or may not embody these traits. For example, Florence experienced homophobic bullying from classmates in a predominantly Jewish school. Lewis' mother had a poor response to his coming out and although she was Christian, she was not a man. One man I met at Bear talked about how his mother "threw the Bible at me" when he first came out but has since come to believe that God made him gay. Ernest witnessed the devaluation of queer people from his friends and coworkers but did not tie their sentiments to religion. Annie has not come out to her mom because she is strictly conservative or a devout Christian, but because she is afraid the homophobic comments of her stepfather have rubbed off on her. In summation, there is overlap between this imagined character and the homophobic actions of friends and classmates but there is also significant divergence.

This tension between the imagined character and lived experiences with homophobia does not indicate blind prejudice but a focus away from interpersonal and towards institutional forms of heterosexism. My participants are keenly aware that behind major pieces of anti-

LGBTQ+ legislation are extremely wealthy conservative political groups such as Moms for Liberty, Citizens Defending Freedom, Alliance Defending Freedom, and Parents' Rights in Education (Villarreal 2023). What is apparent in the imagined enemy my participants construct through counter-hegemonic humor is an awareness of those demographics that most likely have an interest and the funding to maintain, if not worsen, the necropolitical reality of queerness.

Evidence of this awareness is only bolstered by the outright refusal of several of my participants to lie about their sexuality to anyone. Not only would it violate the embodied essentialized self, but within several of these comments was a sense of defiance. As Meg said during the Nashville Group interview, "I mean now I don't give a fuck. I tried my goddamn hardest to be a heterosexual. It didn't fucking work. I would rather commit suicide than be a fucking heterosexual." It is not that my participants *cannot* lie about their sexuality, it is that they *will not*. They may be afraid of the heterosexist actions of an individual, but they are more concerned with the straight, predominately Evangelical Christian constituency of mostly men that they see as furthering their necropolitical existence through legislation and policy. As such, awareness of who the enemy is institutionally is more important than catering to the individual prejudices of strangers. As Fitz explained to me "if you need to call me the F slur every day to wake up and feel good about yourself, I'm happy you have something to look forward to. But just don't vote for me not to be able to get married." Although acceptance was considered important in relationships between family and friends, when it came to stranger sociality there seemed to be more of an emphasis on civil rights. Such an emphasis aligns with ideations of the neoliberal subject who adapts to the social world while pursuing their own interest. In the broader social world, to eliminate a right is more detrimental than denying acceptance as it limits

the neoliberal subject's ability to act as a supposed isolated unit. In the intimate realm, however, acceptance is still considered vital.

The development of a weirdo habitus marks who and what is safe while the opposing material markers of the Evangelical Christian, the straight, and the manly are indicators of the unsafe. Thus, within these jokes that seem to maintain a chasm between straight and queer are warnings and critiques about those who may seek to do harm. The Christian help line is ridiculous because it is dangerous, the straight man's colorless, baggy, and normal outfit is boring because it lacks critical thought. Furthermore, in using counter hegemonic humor, weirdness becomes a way to be matter *in* place among other weirdos by crafting and identifying a political/aesthetic other. Just as the queer subject must die so heterosexuality is naturalized, the heterosexual subject must be poked fun of so a weirdo collective with its own norms can form and necropolitics can be resisted.

Questioning whether we *should* seek to dismantle sexuality is much more complicated than acknowledging the violence within it. My participants have created meaningful, adaptive ways of navigating the necropolitics of sexuality by leveraging American essentialism and weirdo habitus. To reduce this as some sort of collateral that must be bulldozed on the way to some imaginary pre-capitalist utopia is erroneously misguided and ethnocentric. I am particularly indebted to Athena for this realization.

Sitting on my beat-up sofa late one night, I was ranting to Athena about a paper I had recently written on queer mortality. I am trying to suppress the lump in my throat that came with the existential realization that dumb luck is the only thing keeping me off an autopsy table with a bullet in my head, poison in my veins, or a body ravaged by an autoimmune disease. Athena interrupted my downward spiral by asking, "have you ever experienced queer joy?" I stared at

her for a moment, suddenly filled with shame at not having an answer ready. Suddenly, I recalled my most vivid memory from Nashville Pride.

I am standing in front of a long table under two pop-up tents. People are swarming all around me, trying to grab hold and investigate the hundreds of rings laid out in neat rows. Rings of stainless steel and varying colors grace the display boxes, and I am transfixed by a particular set of large, thick rings with the blue, white, and teal bands of the Men-Loving-Men pride flag. After selecting a ring that magically fit my sausage of a right thumb, I am distracted by a small boy in a t-shirt, cargo shorts, and black-rimmed glasses standing next to me. He is full of energy, nervously looking down the table towards the sunset-colored rings that denote the Women-Loving-Women pride flag. He is no more than 12 years old. Shouting to someone staffing the booth he asks, "Where's the gay male ones?"

"Right here," I say flabbergasted by his knowledge. "You wanna switch?"

He runs over to the other side of me, barely waiting for me to scootch over before picking out a ring that fit his small fingers and running back to someone I presume is his caregiver. It is hard to explain what wells up inside me. Something on par with grief. I feel it in the pit of my chest, right below my sternum. And yet, there is something else. Something that makes me feel light. Something that feels like decades of weight has slowly, tenderly been lifted off my shoulders. Staring after the boy, I think back to being 14 and punching my right calf until it bruised while repeating the mantra "I'm straight, I'm straight, I'm straight, I'm straight." I think back to being 16 and trying to figure out how to remove the gay movies from the recently watched section of my Netflix profile. I think back to being 18 and insisting to my mother for the hundredth time that I am dating anthropology and have no time for a girlfriend. In this boy I see the antithesis of where I was at his age.

"Yeah," I told Athena without making eye contact. "I'd say at Pride."

Despite the violence from which sexuality emerges, there is something joyful about navigating that violence. I consider my encounter with the young boy to be my first true experience with Sedgewick's notion of queer performativity. Beyond being dressed right by Athena or listening to the coming out narratives of my participants, this was a moment where I constructed my own essentialized queer identity: an individual, innate, unchanging, "true" queer version of myself that I centered in reflections of the past. Our shared weirdo habitus, as indicated by our now matching rings, denoted our mutual identities and symbolized a great potential, a future where no child experiences the same fears and self-deprecations that inhabit my memories and those of my participants. At that portable ring shop, I participated in a process of meaning-making within the larger social context of shame and stigma imposed by a heterosexist society (Sedgewick 1993, 11). Joy can be made in a necropolitical landscape, and it is in the existence of these deeply felt notions of past, future, self, and community that I begin to hesitate over whether sexuality *should* be dismantled.[24]

To say that sexuality should be dismantled was my initial plan in writing this thesis; however, such a perspective was rooted in my own ethnocentrism. In my enthusiasm over realizing the historical particularity of sexuality and American essentialism as models for power laden ways of being, I fell into the same trap that I find plagues many of my colleagues; just because something is a historical construction does not mean it is not impactful and deeply felt in

[24] I cannot make clear enough that although I use Mbembé's theory of necropolitics to describe the significant amount of death and fear that is present in the lives of queer folk, Mbembé's work specifically and importantly discusses atrocities such as plantation slavery and genocide. In no way am I arguing that the queer experience I describe is comparable to plantation slavery or genocide. Furthermore, no scholar should utilize my work on the necropolitical realm of sexuality to investigate meaning making among the survivors of those atrocities. These experiences are incomparable to what I have described in this thesis and although I celebrate any application of Mbembé' work, I caution against the grouping of historical processes on the bases of a particular theory's ability to explain them.

a potentially positive way. Rather than summing sexuality as a net positive or a net negative, I argue that the experience of sexuality is characterized by an assortment of affective potentials that lie in the tensions of performativity. The complex interactions between essential selfhood, habitus, fear, joy, life, death, joke, critique, resistance, and conformity cannot be summed up as good or bad. It is precisely this tension that I hoped to capture at the beginning of this chapter. In his reflection on the closet, Ernest was certainly questioning the necessity of "all these different names and labels" but at the same time "wonders if that's a good thing." Having sex without sexuality is "tough" not simply because capitalist, heterosexist, and necropolitical forces are difficult to usurp, but because there is something deeply valued in the adaptations to those forces.

### 7.4 Deferring to Slow Scholarship

It is here that I would like to take on the question of whether sexuality *could* be dismantled. I struggle with simply stating that the answer is an unequivocal no. As such, this is where I will defer to slow scholarship and state confidently, unabashedly, and pridefully that I have no idea. It is this question that I hope to investigate during the unknown number of years I may be lucky enough to have in academia and I encourage any and all other scholars to pick up the theoretical trowel along with me. What is clear is that such an undertaking would require major re-workings of the political-economic realities and subsequent ethnopsychological paradigms from which American essentialism was created. Beyond this, it may require the surrendering of authority from the very disciplines that created the concepts of psyche, population, sex, and so on that accompanied the deployment of sexuality. At the risk of sounding overly simplistic, the dismantlement of sexuality is not possible while free market logics circulate at every level of social reality.

However, something must be done to the necropolitical forces working upon queer lives. Surely the terrifying statistics should not be ignored. Yet, the intense meaning gained from queer performativity should not be ignored either. I argue that until a better solution is found, we should simply allow the essentialist model to proliferate identity categories as American essentialism, although frustratingly imperfect, is still a powerful framework for legitimizing the humanity of otherwise dehumanized groups. It is not uncommon to hear (among straight and queer folk alike) complaints over the adding letters to the "original" LGBT. One may overhear complaints about there being too many identities to keep track of and to the heterosexist who could barely stand the existence of gay, the expansion of the political term seems nightmarish. To this I say keep adding letters. If queer legitimacy relies on American essentialism to create intelligible, categorical subjects and discourses capable of countering the claims of perversion and pollution perpetuated by heterosexist logics, so be it. If the creation of new terms allows someone to use the logic of discovery to rationalize and legitimize the shifting nature of human eros and libido, so be it. Until such time where historic and linguistic forces have made it impossible for any description of desire to be prefaced by "I am," and until the taboos of desire center on actions rather than personages, I celebrate the addition of any number of identity terms in the interest of alleviating autonomous pollution and out-of-placeness.

Surely, there are readers who will see this conclusion as a deferment to hegemonic pragmatism, a kind of bowing to Muñoz's notion of "straight time" that is akin to homonormative activists privileging *inclusion into* rather than a *dismantling of* institutional compulsory heterosexuality (2019). In many ways that is a fair reading of this conclusion. By creating new desire-based identity categories through the logics of American essentialism to alleviate autonomous pollution and out-of-placeness, the capitalist impulse to speciate is left

intact and the necropolitical realities of compulsory heterosexuality are maintained although mitigated. Essentially, I have deferred to sociolinguistic Band-Aids to patch up (sometimes literal) bullet holes. However, I in no way suggest that this is how the future ought to be. Instead, I challenge my fellow queer utopians to acknowledge the joyful adaptations that are present in this necropolitical reality. To acknowledge that there is strength and wisdom in the emic realities we study and, for many of us, inhabit is not deferment to hegemonic pragmatism but the framing of the present as a resource from which the future can be imaged. Muñoz calls on queer folk to leverage perceptions of the "no-longer-conscious" past to imagine a "not-yet-here" future and create concrete utopias (30-31). However, instead of looking at the present as simply "poisonous and insolvent" (30), I believe there are lessons to be learned and strengths to be leveraged in the present which can help create concrete utopias.

To shrug off the use of American essentialism and the creation of weirdo habitus as blind adherence from a population that is ignorant of "the truth" would be to ignore the hegemonic realities they lay bare in their practices. What lessons about hegemonic transformation can be glimpsed from the discursive shift away from a strictly heterosexual essential self towards an essential self with multiple possible sexualities? What can we learn from this historical process and how can we apply it to the fight for trans rights? Or perhaps to the recent violations of reproductive rights? Or perhaps to the ways that subjects in settler colonies communicate their desires to the state?[25] What can being weird tell us about creating a world where human variation is greeted with celebration rather than annihilation? What notions of self are implicit in our queer

[25] A question that Elizabeth Povinelli boldly takes on in *The Empire of Love* where she fleshes out how discourses around individual freedom and social constraint can be used to "distribute life, goods, and values across social spaces" in liberal settler colonies (2006, 3-4). Although out of the scope of this project and conclusion, I believe that the application of her work to the questions above and in conversation with an analysis of ethnopsychological regimes may prove fruitful for scholarly work aimed at challenging heterosexist hegemonic pragmatism.

imaginaries and what are their political implications? If the psyche is a cultural construction, what new notions of self can we imagine and how might they disrupt the present? Asking these questions may help lay the groundwork for imagining a future where patterns of desire are no longer a totalizing aspect of self while also acknowledging that the regimes of American essentialism and sexuality are constructive of the psyches that live within them. Just as Kathi Weeks claims in her work on family abolition (2023), my call for the proliferation of essentialized identity categories is a first step in a much longer process of social transformation whose rewards will not be realized in the immediate future as we are constructed by the realities that necessitate that process. The impacts of this labor will be felt in the shifting ethnopsychological paradigms of those who will create sexual lives far different from the ones outlined in the preceding chapters. This call for imagining better futures thus represents the final tension of this thesis. We all must acknowledge the present as destructive yet constructive, an obstacle yet a tool, something to usurp yet whose usurpation we may never personally see. Like those whose lives illustrate this work, if we want to abolish the historical ills that make death so familiar we must learn to live within tensions.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A


Screenshot from a public Closeted TikTok video obtained with the creator's approval.

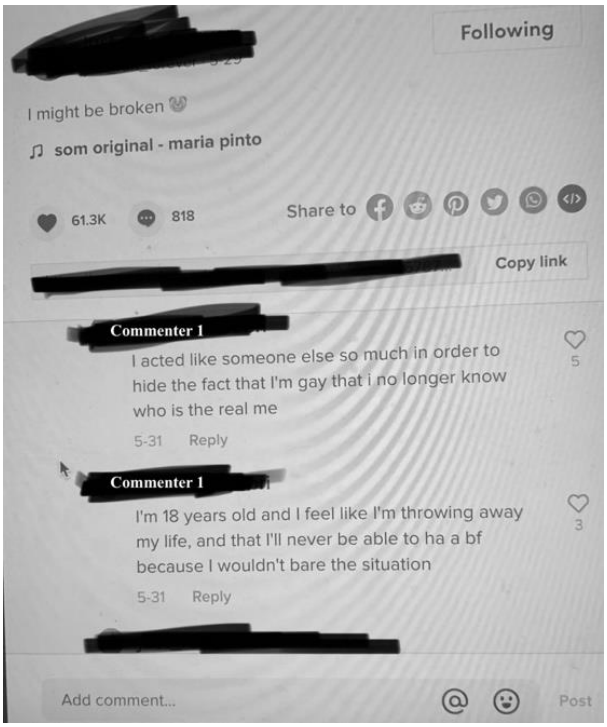
## Appendix B


Screenshot from a public Closeted TikTok video obtained with the creator's approval.

## Appendix C


Screenshot from a public Closeted TikTok video obtained with the creator's approval.

## Appendix D




Screenshot from the comment section of a public Closeted TikTok video.

## Appendix E


Screenshots from Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2020, 271).

## Appendix F


Screenshots from Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2020, 272-273).

**Appendix G**


Screenshots from Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2020, 277).

**Appendix H**


Screenshots from Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2020, 281).

## Appendix I


Screenshots from Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2020, 284-285).

## Appendix J


Screenshots from Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper: Volume 2* (2020, 286-287).

**Appendix K**

Earrings for sale at Second Friday (photo taken by the author).

**Appendix L**

Earrings for sale at Second Friday (photo taken by the author).

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