

THE CLOSET DOOR IS OPEN: COMING OUT (OR SOMETHING LIKE IT) IN CONTEMPORARY CELEBRITY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary celebrity culture embodies a dissonant tension between a want to end the social demand to “come out” and a hypervigilant culture of digital surveillance via social media that looks for traces of outness. Such that during a recent red carpet interview Billie Eilish describes how she did come out, need not come out, does not believe in coming out, and, later, was outed. This article utilizes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* and Michel Foucault’s “will to knowledge” to explain how the closet works in contemporary celebrity culture. It outlines a successive chronology of celebrity coming out genres beginning with Ellen DeGeneres’ influential TIME magazine cover and continuing through deviations from this modern standard that trend toward more obscure and indirect expressions over time. It concludes that the contemporary closet door is best understood as “open,” meaning that nonchalant transparency is coveted, and yet personal interiority remains vulnerably put on display for scrutiny. This results in modern celebrity coming outs taking the form of puzzling incoherence, to the extent that whether a coming out has occurred is unclear, and viscerally direct statements seemingly designed to quell inquiry and accusations of queer baiting.

Keywords: celebrity, queerness, coming out, closeting.

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In the 2023 *Variety* Power of Women cover story, singer/songwriter Billie Eilish was credited by the publication with “coming out” via remarks she made about being attracted to women. Eilish said about women: “I love them so much. I love them as people. I’m attracted to them as people, I’m physically attracted to them. But I’m also so intimidated by them and their beauty and their presence” (Katcy 2023). At the Power of Women event that occurred two weeks following the cover story’s release, a *Variety* reporter followed up with Eilish during a red carpet interview and asked, “Did you mean to come out in this story?” Eilish responded: “No, I didn’t. But I kind of thought, ‘Wasn’t it obvious?’ I didn’t realize people didn’t know. I just don’t really believe in it. I’m just, like, ‘Why can’t we just exist?’” (Thompson 2023). Despite her initial suggestion that “coming out” was itself passe or unneeded, Eilish went on to describe it as “cool” and yet simultaneously as

something that creates nervous feelings for her. She said, “But I saw the article, and I was like, ‘Oh I guess I came out today.’ OK cool. It’s exciting to me because I guess people didn’t know, but it’s cool that they know, but ooh, I’m nervous talking about it” (Thompson 2023). In an Instagram post following the event, Eilish described the in-person interview as an “outing,” a term commonly used to describe a disclosure of identity made without permission. She posted: “thanks variety for my award and for also outing me on a red carpet at 11 am instead of talking about anything else that matters i like boys and girls leave me alone about it please literally who cares” (@billieeilish, December 3, 2023). Three years prior to the *Variety* story, Eilish’s femme-centric dance video for her single “Lost Cause” elicited accusations from fans that the star was “queer baiting,” a term that has become used to describe the lucrative cooption and mass marketing of queer sexuality by those not (or not known to be) queer (Bryony 2021, Kelly 2021). Eilish then posted to Instagram the ambiguous phrase “i like girls” (@billieeilish, June 10, 2021), which prompted speculation by news sites that she intended to confirm a queer identity with the post, though no certainty formed in the public consciousness about the message’s intent at that time (Robledo 2021; Barglowski 2021).

1. OPENING THE CLOSET

The timeline of events surrounding Eilish’s perceived public coming out reflects a fractured understanding of the historical situation of the closet. One so dense and varied that Eilish seems to suggest at once that she was out, need not come out, did come out, and was outed. All of which are feasibly true. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick laid the groundwork for our contemporary understandings of how the closet has and continues to function. In it, she relays among many accounts, the case of Acanfora, an eighth-grade earth science teacher who in 1973 was transferred to a non-teaching position in Montgomery County, Maryland after the Board of Education learned he was gay. When the teacher sued, the federal district court upheld the Board of Education’s decision, claiming that he brought undue attention to himself and his sexuality that would obstruct the students’ education. An appeals court ruled instead that Acanfora had no standing to sue at all, citing his failure to disclose past involvement with homophile organizations which would have prevented him from being hired in the first place. Sedgwick offers here that Acanfora is found to have simultaneously shared too much about his sexuality and too little (Sedgwick 1990, 69–70). The contradictions located in cases such as this, and Eilish’s, convey the multiplicity of meaning that the closet holds for queer people. Such that we may be seen at once as queer, closeted, out, avoidant, negligent, too silent, oversharing, deluded, ashamed, unremarkable, attention-seeking, too queer, not really queer, questioning, confused, or queer baiting.

This intricate overlap in comprehension of “the closet” and “coming out” has reverberated in subsequent scholarship probing the evolution of queer language and queer

life since Sedgwick theorized these terms. Scholars have wondered whether we have in fact reached a place “beyond the closet” (Seidman 2002) while others have instead posited new dynamics for language of queer disclosure, especially among queer youth (Guittar 2014; Morris and Sauntson 2007). These tensions demand further consideration of the divide between an expectation that the structure of the closet is “over,” and the persistent demand in everyday queer life to engage with its legacy. Within contemporary US celebrity culture, stars find their existences more visible and commented upon through journalism and social media (Motschenbacher 2019; Hardie 2010). Scholars have critically considered the structure of the celebrity closet, offering language to describe public figures who resisted the basic binary of in/out or challenged the existence of a closet at all. Vincent L. Stephens describes a bowing of binary distinctions within the history of popular music wherein several major artists morph or distend the idea of the closet rather than neatly participate in the in/out binary. He calls this first “shaking the closet” (2010) and later “rocking the closet” (2019), noting the insufficiency of the term “closeted” to encompass the rich history of gender and identity performance in the work of Little Richard and Johnny Matthis, among others. Stephen contests the binarized idea that pre-Stonewall artists were innately closeted and instead outlines a range of “queering tools” that push and pull public perception in disparate directions. For example, the contrast between “self-neutering,” or downplaying discussions of one’s own romantic and sexual relationships to fit within hetero norms, and “self-enfreaking,” or “playing the freak” as a form of audacious self-expression that challenges masculine gender norms (Stephens 2019, 12–19). Nicholas de Villiers additionally notes the limitations of the term “closeted” as applied to the work of queer authors and cultural celebrities such as Michel Foucault and Andy Warhol (2012). de Villiers posits “opacity” to think through the resistance of these figures to the typical confessional structure of closet discourse. “Opacity” here means “an alternative queer strategy or tactic that is not linked to an interpretation of hidden depths, concealed meanings, or a neat opposition between silence and speech” (de Villiers 2012, 6). Rather than valorizing hegemonic notions of “transparency,” de Villiers instead offers opacity as a productive site of contestation which resists the notion of sexual secrets.

These theories of the closet as a gradient rather than a binary build upon Eve Sedgwick’s argument that coming out does not only (or even most often) take the form of direct statements such as “I am gay.” Sedgwick acknowledges that what constitutes a speech act of coming out is uncertain and may vary depending on context. For example, she offers an anecdote wherein two friends, a man and a woman, describe how despite her knowing of the man’s sexual relationships with men, she did not understand him to be out until he relayed to her that he had come out to someone else. Thus, transparency about queer sexual relations did not seem to suggest to her that he was out, but his account of coming out did (Sedgwick 1990, 3–4). Additionally, Sedgwick’s work invests in

the disruption of binary thinking. In terms of gender and sexuality, this means that binary distinctions between homosexual/heterosexual are themselves less rigid than commonly believed. However, it further expands to other distinctions, including the perception of being out/in regarding the closet, and importantly asks readers to see enmeshed overlap as a feasible means to understand the complexities of queer life. Sedgwick characterizes queerness as the “open mesh of possibilities” (Sedgwick 1993, 8) such that constructions of sex and gender, along with everything else, might be seen and understood to mean more than one thing at the same time.

Queerness represents for Sedgwick a decidedly unique category surrounding topics of disclosure. Notably, queer disclosures carry meaning for both the speaker and the listener. They invite the listener to investigate the self, questioning what the disclosure says about them: their gender, sexuality, social relations, and societal standing. This differs from other disclosures of identity such as disclosing that one is Jewish, for example. The listener in this instance does not wonder of themselves: “Am I Jewish?” It is this inquiry of the self that she says underlies the egregious historical practice of gay panic defenses, which make the case that a violent attacker had a reasonable moment of panic when interacting with a homosexual. This panic is rooted in self-evaluation, wondering if one might also be queer and be open (or seem open) to queer engagements. To understand the complex phenomenon by which queerness affects both the queer victim and their attacker, Sedgwick devises a theory of overlapping minoritizing and universalizing discourses. There is a queer minority, a category of individuals who self-describe as queer. However, queerness has an overlapping and simultaneous universalizing relationality to all people (Sedgwick 1990, 18–21). We all experience gender and sexuality. Societal norms about sex and gender affect more than just those who self-describe as queer.

Sedgwick’s description of indirect and direct speech acts (uncertain as they are) and minoritizing and universalizing discourses (overlapping as they are) help us to better understand the complexities of contemporary US celebrity coming outs (or not coming outs) as was the case with Billie Eilish who did and didn’t come out and was outed. This accounts for one half of the contemporary trend toward coming out’s ever advancing obfuscation. The way we seem increasingly less certain amid diffuse statements across the internet as to whether any central act of coming out, addressed to us one and all, has occurred. So much so that Billie Eilish recounts that for herself she felt as though she had come out when she read someone describing her statements as coming out. One trend among contemporary queer celebrity culture has been toward more implicit remarks rather than direct and highly publicized statements. A trend that reflects a social move away from a rigid perception of out/in and toward a queered non-binary *mélange* of states of the closet. The social attitude Eilish signals when she says “I don’t really believe in it” about coming out.

Simultaneously, we are finding our private lives ever more scrutinized and surveilled via the mass distribution of personal information, including images and videos, across social medial platforms. This latter, contradictory, urge away from the nonchalant feeling that coming out is no longer needed, can be better understood via what Michel Foucault calls the “will to knowledge,” or a desire to detect and uncover queer identity as a feature of public life. (Foucault 1978, 11–13). For Foucault, this desire is intimately linked to the invention of the homosexual as an identity category in the late nineteenth century, which set the stage for a perceptive shift from thinking about queer sexuality as behaviors to indicators of homosexual identity. In Foucault’s words, the medicalizing language which enshrined the homosexual as a category of sexual deviant created for them “a past, a case history, and a childhood ... a secret that always gave itself away” (Foucault 1978, 43). This shift can also be understood through what Christopher Nealon describes as the “ethnic” model for understanding homosexuality as denoting “peoplehood” rather than seeing sex acts as individual and unrelated (Nealon 2001, 1–8). This understanding explains the public compulsion to know someone’s sexuality, the want or belief that we bear traces of an underlying queer self to be discovered. Queerness is therefore something to be detected about someone, an identity from which all manifestations in speech and mannerism now follow.

In this article, I will use Sedgwick’s theory of the closet and Michel Foucault’s “will to knowledge” as foundational tools for understanding how coming out functions (or perhaps no longer does) in contemporary celebrity culture, expanding and altering these concepts to address the development of social media and conflicting urges to both erase coming out as a cultural practice and simultaneously scrutinize every expression for traces of coming out-ness. I will present a chronology of the modern US celebrity coming out, outlining three successive genres (Swales 1990, 45–58) by which to understand some methodological approaches to the act. These three coming out genres are not comprehensive and do not account for all forms of celebrity coming out. However, they feel prototypical of major trends and indicative of how coming out has morphed in celebrity public relations since the 1990s. I take Ellen DeGeneres’ coming out via broadcast television event as a baseline for the modern US celebrity coming out and break down how subsequent iterations have moved away from broadcast genres toward narrowcast genres by decreasing the prominence of their placement and the explicitness of their messaging toward gradually quieter, nonchalant and niche media coming outs. I then outline a range of disparate contemporary strategies for celebrity coming outs and try to contextualize their varied approaches within a cultural logic that sees outness as unnecessary and yet everywhere all at once. In adding to discussions which linguistically frame the closet door as shaken/rocked (Stephens), opaque (de Villiers), or, as in the case of Suzanne M. Johnson, “revolving” (2008), I settled on the title of “open” here to emphasize both the perceived invitation for foraging social media has nourished and the vulnerability for the

subject to have their interiority set on display by the perceived invitation of the door ajar. A door left open suggests a casual act, a blasé “who cares?” yet the nosy voyeurs in each of us cannot help but peek inside. This seems to me to best describe our current moment of the closet as I unpack it here. A potent contradiction between wanting to casually exist and yet feeling constantly on display.

2. “THE ELLEN”

In the 1997 episode of the TV sitcom *Ellen* titled “The Puppy Episode,” comedian/actress Ellen DeGeneres’ eponymous character Ellen Morgan accidentally announces over an airport loudspeaker the infamous words “I’m gay.” In its diegetic context, the act is a snafu. Ellen means to confess only to Susan (guest star Laura Dern) that she is gay. However, a misstep in the direction of a microphone turns this into public knowledge. In mass culture, Ellen (the actor) was also simultaneously coming out to the public. The character’s snafu, which accidentally broadcasts an intimate moment to the entire airport, allegorizes DeGeneres’ own broadcast model of disclosure. The April 14, 1997, cover of *TIME* magazine with DeGeneres front and center read in unquestionably clear bright red font “Yep, I’m gay.” The folksy, affirmative language of “Yep” speaks to DeGeneres’ comedy persona while also signaling her belief that she need reply to public scrutiny. While she, like many stars before and since, questioned the idea of the closet, she admitted that it loomed large over nearly every prior press appearance, stating “In every interview I ever did everyone tried to trap me into saying I was gay. I mean, I really tried to figure out every way to avoid answering that question for as long as I could” (Handy 1997).

DeGeneres’ explicit statement and the accompanying media fanfare set a precedent for the modern celebrity coming out. It suggested that in 1997, a celebrity coming out was a major news event. It would be direct, indisputable. Not shyly, or implicitly suggested. It was a broadcast model for coming out befitting the age of broadcast television. She came out at once to all of America. Ellen Morgan instantly became the first gay lead character on US network television. A precedent that would pave the way for future television representation. However, Ellen would falter and be canceled the following season.

DeGeneres’ style of coming out went on to be emulated as if it was a standardized procedure. In 2006, former *NSYNC group member Lance Bass appeared on a *People Magazine* cover which read plainly “I’m gay.” In 2008, American Idol’s season two runner-up Clay Aiken reiterated DeGeneres’ affirmative headline with a *People Magazine* cover announcing “Yes, I’m gay.” A consistent pattern among these statements is the tacit acknowledgement that the question has always, already been asked. Hence the affirmative “Yep” or “Yes.” Bass’ relationship with Reichen Lehmkuhl, a past contestant on the NBC reality competition series *The Apprentice*, received a fair share of tabloid speculation, especially via gay gossip blogger Perez Hilton, with articles dedicated to shows of intimacy between the two as slight as wearing articles of each other’s clothing

(dubbed: “man sharing”) (“YOURS, MINE & HIS” 2006, Advocate.com Editors 2010). Aiken had been similarly targeted with speculation after former Green Beret John Paulus gave an account of a one-night stand he had with Aiken to the *National Enquirer* (Admin 2008). Paulus further recounted the experience during an interview on The Howard Stern Show where he claimed to have DNA proof of the encounter in the form of a towel he saved after Aiken used it to wipe his ejaculate (“Show Rundown: February 9, 2006”). Stories such as these cement a creepily graphic level of observation and detection, seeking to uncover queer humans as if we were spies, or pod people in disguise.

Other actors who made such disclosures at this time did so with the direct acknowledgement that they felt urged to respond, despite complex feelings about the act itself. This includes Neil Patrick Harris’ 2006 assertion in a statement to *People Magazine* that “it seems there is speculation and interest in my private life and relationships. I am happy to dispel any rumors or misconceptions and am quite proud to say that I am a very content gay man living my life to the fullest” (People Staff 2006). Gossip blogger Perez Hilton had sought to out Harris by publicly soliciting stories from men who had sexual experiences with him (Editors 2021). Actor T.R. Knight’s awaited response, also via *People*, after being indirectly outed by tabloid reports that he was called a homophobic slur by co-star Isaiah Washington on the set of *Grey’s Anatomy* stated, “I guess there have been a few questions about my sexuality, and I’d like to quiet any unnecessary rumors that may be out there. While I prefer to keep my personal life private, I hope the fact that I’m gay isn’t the most interesting part of me” (People Staff 2006). These instances avow the demand to address public inquiry, whether implicit or explicit, felt by performers. Their want to “clear up” speculation, and simultaneously make transparent an identity already spoken about in whispers and gossip. Additionally, none of these has the luxury of being demur. As with Ellen Morgan accidentally amplifying her voice for all to hear, the trend was a direct and irrefutable statement of fact (“I am gay”) made known to as wide an audience as possible.

3. “THE JODIE”

While the experiences of actor/director Jodie Foster also include a persistent demand for disclosure, her public engagements with the closet reflect a renegotiation of coming out that popularizes more nuanced and indirect expressions. In 1991, Jodie Foster’s face was one of several allegedly closeted celebs whose image appeared on posters plastered around New York City by queer activist group Outpost that read “Absolutely Queer” (Turque 1991). The action reflected a desperate want among queer activists for out, visible queer celebrities amid the tragic death and devastation of the AIDS epidemic. This desperation was fueled by a belief that if every queer person were out, it would dilute collective bigotry and discrimination by putting a more immediate, sentimental face (a relative, a friend) to queer pain for more Americans. Simultaneously, closeted figures such as New York City’s mayor Ed Koch (Flegenheimer and Goldensohn 2022) were seen as uniquely

at fault for inaction around the threat of HIV/AIDS, as any intimation of queer allyship might tip their hand.

In September of 2008, Foster's likeness appeared on the cover of *Out* magazine accompanied by the text "The Glass Closet" (Musto 2008). The image reflected a belief that queer celebrities were living lives of semi-transparency. Foster was often seen and photographed with her then partner Cydney Bernard and their children. However, she resisted the media's plea for her to perform "The Ellen," the altogether irrefutable broadcast affirmation "Yep, I'm gay." The semi-transparency of "The Glass Closet" can be felt in the 2007 remarks that are often cited as Foster's first public acknowledgement of her partner, Bernard. During an untelevised breakfast event celebrating the *Hollywood Reporter's* Women in Entertainment Power 100 at which Foster accepted the Sherry Lansing Leadership Award, she was quoted by press in attendance thanking "my beautiful Cydney who sticks with me through all the rotten and the bliss" (Hankins 2007). The statement marks a trend toward greater obscurity and less visible transmission of the coming out statement. Not a magazine cover stating "Yep, I'm gay" (i.e. a broadcast media event) but an untelevised and primarily anecdotal account of a statement of thanks to someone, we presume Bernard, named Cydney of indeterminate connection and relation. And while the remarks are seen as uniquely public, breaking Foster's history of not commenting, they are still only semi-transparent. Some news outlets stoked gay interests with headlines about Foster's statement (Warn 2007). Yet much of the wide-reaching mainstream coverage made no mention of it (Nordyke 2007; CBS News 2007).

The reverberations of "The Jodie" are felt in Matt Bomer's comparable remarks made at an untelevised event in 2012. Accepting the Steve Chase Foundation's New Generation Arts and Activism Award, Bomer made what were seen as his first public remarks acknowledging his partner Simon Halls and their children. Bomer was quoted saying, "I'd really especially like to thank my beautiful family: Simon, Kit, Walker, Henry ... Thank you for teaching me what unconditional love is. You will always be my proudest accomplishment" (Out.com Editors 2012). Though there was no official broadcast of the event, audio and video recordings of Bomer's speech made their way to social media, indirectly preserving it in digital ink.

Foster's legacy of indirect coming outs is further solidified by her 2013 televised acceptance of the Cecille B. DeMille Award at the Golden Globes. Foster primed the audience for a big announcement, something people have wanted her to say for a long time. She then leaned into the microphone, taunting the audience with the allure of a direct "I am..." statement, only to defer the coveted ending with "...single." Foster then went on to assert, "there won't be a big coming-out speech tonight because I already did my coming out ... in those very quaint days when a fragile young girl would open up to trusted friends and family and co-workers" (ABC News 2013). The speech acknowledges her two children and her now former partner, Cydney Bernard, by name. It is a coming out speech

in which Foster comes out by announcing that there will not be a coming out speech. She comes out by telling us she will not come out, that she already has. And yet, interestingly, her un-coming out, is perhaps regarded as her clearest and most widely broadcast coming out moment. Eight years later, amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, Foster won the Best Supporting Actress Golden Globe and accepted from home wearing pajamas in bed with wife, Alexandra Hedison, and their dog. It is a strikingly casual moment, indicating the evolution of Foster's public life as well as a larger cultural trend toward nonchalant transparency.

4. "THE ZACHARY"

Contemporary US celebrity coming outs have trended further toward concise disclosures made amid large public profiles, sandwiched discreetly within bulk text. This gives the statements an air of neutrality and nonimportance relative to prior magazine covers and televised broadcast announcements. *Star Trek* actor Zachary Quinto made his first press remarks about being gay as part of a 2011 profile published in *New York Magazine* titled "What's Up, Spock?" Nestled within a paragraph of text, Quinto was quoted on the topic of his recent performance in the Tony Kushner play *Angels in America*, a Pulitzer Prize winning work of queer drama about the subject of HIV/AIDS. Quinto stated: "As a gay man, it made me feel like there's so much work to be done" (Wallace 2011). While the statement would go on to be reposted in articles touting Quinto's interview as a coming out (US Weekly 2011; Reuters 2011), the original article does not frame itself as such, nor does it emphasize the remark more than any other within the body of text. Statements such as this cultivate an initial niche appeal. They are to be stumbled upon by readers of a publication invested enough to consider the lengthy text. They are not headlines, just copy. And yet, celebrity media outlets report and share such statements as if they were as widely and intentionally broadcast as the classic Ellen cover of *TIME*.

A subsequent statement of similarly quiet initial scope was Sam Smith's first remarks regarding their inspiration for their debut album *In the Lonely Hour* being about unrequited love for a man in a 2014 cover story of music magazine *FADER*. They explained that "In the Lonely Hour is about a guy I fell in love with last year, and he didn't love me back" (Robertson 2014). Smith's sexuality had been carefully managed in their public image up until this point. The music video for their breakout single "Stay with Me" did not visualize the object of the song's request to "stay," showing only Smith sitting in an empty bed. The video for the follow-up hit "I'm Not the Only One" told a story of infidelity between a heterosexual couple played by Dianna Agron and Chris Messina. The 2015 video for "Lay Me Down" was the first to irrefutably showcase a man as Smith's love

interest. Although, admittedly, even in this context the lover was deceased and shown only in flashbacks.¹

Frank Ocean migrated “The Zachary” to personal social media in 2012 when, on the eve of the release of his album *channel ORANGE*, he posted a block text statement about the album’s inspiration on the blog site Tumblr. Included within the text were the statements “4 SUMMERS AGO, I MET SOMEBODY. I WAS 19 YEARS OLD. HE WAS TOO ... IT WAS MY FIRST LOVE. IT CHANGED MY LIFE” (Frank Ocean 2012). Though the message directly addresses his audience on Tumblr and is signed casually “-FRANK,” as if a direct and private correspondence, the simultaneity of Tumblr’s public availability allowed for the proliferation of Ocean’s speech act. Therefore, his statement about artistic inspiration to fans was widely reposted as a universal coming out. Publicly visible social media often feels as though we are speaking to a finite network of followers and friends, yet it can be accessed, reposted, retweeted, and turned into a massively visible public artifact. This duality speaks to the shifting landscape of celebrity coming outs, one that seems at once to be about nonchalance (the push away from coming out at all) and a hypervigilant scrutiny (the feeling that every aspect of the social should be accessible to the masses).

5. NEW DIRECTIONS

The overlapping chronology of these loosely shaped celebrity coming out genres “The Ellen” → “The Jodie” → “The Zachary” helps us understand a nuanced but progressing sea change away from broadcast announcements toward narrowcast announcements or un-announcements. Contemporary queer disclosures have entered a unique stage of simultaneous vagueness and overt directness. Social media has created a digital portrait of each star’s life such that photos and statements are pored over with inquisitive eyes that seek affirmation of queer identity everywhere. Yet the blasé post-coming out attitudes espoused in statements such as that of Billie Eilish (“Why can’t we just exist?”) speak to a concurrent scrutiny about this hypervigilant evaluation of visual evidence. In a strange way, the two sustain each other. The feeling that no one “comes out” anymore, means that outness must then somehow be detected via audiovisual evidence. As queer people exist and their lives are preserved by social media, each trace becomes a part of a dossier one might use to conclusively determine if queerness happened. Furthermore, the dissolution of binaries such as straight/queer makes these methodologies simultaneously moot. When some of music’s biggest heartthrobs, such as Harry Styles and Bad Bunny, cultivate a public image that blends the classically masculine appeals of chiseled jaws and pectoral muscles with nail polish, women’s clothing, and comfortable same sex flirtations, the methodology of accumulating audiovisual evidence alone short circuits. Bad

¹ As a caveat, the earlier music video for “Leave Your Lover” did suggest a mixed gender love triangle but its ambiguities made it unclear whom Smith coveted.

Bunny kissing a man on stage at the MTV Video Music Awards doesn't make him queer. Harry Styles wearing a dress on the cover of *Vogue* doesn't make him queer. So, what does? How is coming out simultaneously “over” and omnipresent?

Contemporary life as documented in social media represents a continuous flow of implicit statements and disclosures. Choices of clothing, of friends, of where to rest your hand on someone's body when you hug them, of if and how we are tender and with whom. Ubiquitous surveillance in the age of social media makes the closet omnipresent and coming out readable in every Tweet, post, or Gram. So much so that queer lives in progress become surveilled by a vigilant detective spirit to identify trace proof of their existence. Recently, young stars have faced scrutiny about their actions and statements from a public that expects full transparency regarding sexual details. Demands for outness have been placed upon them at the same time as proclamations that coming out “doesn't matter” anymore, a potent contradiction that resists binarization in a classically Sedgwick sort of way. Joshua Bassett, star of Disney's *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, mentioned off-handedly during a promotional interview with *Clevver News* that he thought Harry Styles was “hot.” Before adding demurely, “This is also my coming out video, I guess” (Clevver News 2021). While Bassett's quip about this being his “coming out video” might suggest an obvious intention to convey queer identity, the potential to misunderstand or misinterpret such a statement is often invoked to raise questions. Perhaps he was joking? Consider, for example, a 2016 incident in which *Teen Wolf* star Tyler Posey appeared to make such a declaration via Snapchat when he posted a video of himself standing beneath the sign for Gay Street in New York City and announced, “I'm gay!” (Avery 2016). The actor later apologized for the video via a series of Tweets, stating “Although I'm not gay, I fully support the LGBTQ community. This was a moment intended to reflect that ... I am truly sorry to the people I've offended or lessened how big coming out is” (Crispim 2016).²

And so, the meaning of Bassett's statement—earnest coming out or coy joke about flirting with homosexuality—lingered among a vexed public. Importantly, both meanings invoke Sedgwick's universalizing and minoritizing discourses. Truly, who among us does not think that Harry Styles is hot? Straight, queer, or otherwise. Yet the relatively banal statement became a point of social media obsession, begging the question “Did Joshua Bassett just come out?” “Out” here would mean he, in a minoritized sense, self-describes as queer (or any number of identities under the umbrella term queer). Bassett's formal reply to this public inquiry was a Tweet which included a row of rainbow hearts in the color scheme of the Pride flag that claimed no specific minoritized identity but instead gestured toward a still nascent self-discovery, stating “my entire life people have

² Posey did years later publicly describe past sexual experiences with men, though asserted no specific queer identity (Malkin 2021).

told me my sexuality. people have shamed me for things they know nothing about. i want to say thank you for those who stand for love and acceptance” (@joshuatbassett, May 11, 2021). Some interpreted the message as acknowledging his unlabeled queerness. Yet the text itself suggests misunderstanding, that people don’t know what they are talking about. Perhaps this is to suggest people “reading in” to his statements misunderstood him? Presumed his sexuality incorrectly? Like Posey, Bassett could here be denying that he is queer himself but affirming a pro-queer and inclusive stance. The rainbow hearts appear directly beneath text that reads “love who you love shamelessly. it’s ok to still be figuring out who you are. life’s too short to let ignorance and hatred win.” Again, perhaps this can be read to mean he is still figuring out who he is, but also it says most plainly “you.” Who “you” are. Love who “you” love. In one reading of the post, Bassett says, people have tried to tell him what his sexuality is, and he is still figuring it out, but he appreciates your love and support. In another (perhaps among many more) he says I have been told my sexuality incorrectly by people who don’t understand, but you do you (i.e. I am not queer, but I support you, if you are). What seems apparent is that the manner of coming out here, if indeed this is taken as a coming out, could perhaps be best categorically understood as a bewildering “Huh?” That is, the methodology of coming out, if Bassett came out, increases public confusion, and feels indiscernible at every turn. It is a coming out that at first appears to happen plainly (“This is also my coming out video, I guess”) and yet digital ephemera has created a feeling of uncertainty as to whether it happened at all.³

Digital artifacts such as Posey’s and Bassett’s convey how nebulous coming out truly is now. Apparently, a man shouting, “I’m gay!” is not enough to be certain anymore. He may just be showing solidarity. Do rainbow hearts a coming out make? Unclear. While the “Huh?” category embodies coming out’s slipperiness, its indiscernibility. There is yet another inverse and fascinating reciprocal strategy. The clear as day, “let’s get it over with” transparency of a statement so irrefutable it ends all speculation. I am especially enamored with the terse stoicism of Carl Nassib, who in 2021 posted a video to Instagram beginning with the at once fatigued and urgent expression “I just want to take a quick moment to say that I’m gay” (@carlnassib, June 21, 2021). While Nassib’s video goes on to discuss his larger thoughts on the importance of visibility, this initial statement marks such a sharp and stunning linguistic disjunction. “I just want to take a quick moment”

³ Bassett’s sexuality remains under scrutiny. Subsequent interviews feature more unambiguous statements of queer identity from Bassett (framed predominantly as reflections on his “coming out” via the Clevver News video and Tweet) (Bennett 2021; Tracy 2022). However, Bassett seemed to delete some social media posts regarding his queer identity and was very publicly baptized at a homophobic church in 2023, leading some fans to express concern for his well-being amid homophobic religious rhetoric (Rude 2023, Dailey 2023).

speaks of incidental things, trivial matters so small they deserve not more than one moment's time. While "to say that I'm gay" makes Nassib the first active player in NFL history to come out as gay. The overture of nonchalant compliance gives way to a history-making shift in professional sports within 13 words. Nassib seems to be addressing the perilous uncertainty, the belabored detective work, the frustrating inspection of life, by saying this is something to do quickly, to move past. Rip off the Band-Aid, so to speak. But also, at the same time, I like to imagine that he was busy practicing and just out of frame is a sports team mid-huddle, and he's all like "Just a minute guys, I gotta do something real fast" and then pivots to the sidelines to make a quick announcement before he rejoins the group. That the parameters of the event are so expansive as to be everything and nothing all at once.

Even more directly, singer Omar Apollo replied to a Tweet speculating that he may be "queer baiting" with intimations of queerness in his songs and videos with the debate-ending retort "no ib sucking dick fr" (@omarapollo, Nov 28, 2022). Apollo's remarks perhaps best embody the volatile surveillance and disparate nonchalance of the contemporary closet. The want for a star not to only say "Yep, I'm gay" or acknowledge their partner by name, but to see and know every aspect of their sexuality. He at once communicates the frankness it takes to end speculation, to resolve the surveillance of every lyric or photo, and the invasiveness one may feel being surveilled. To feel it wanted to be known what you do in your private sex life. The coveting of knowledge about the body in active moments of sexual contact. Yet its bluntness also implies the visceral plainness of coming out, the negligible slim-ness of it, the anti-climax. How coveted and yet how run-of-the-mill it has become: {insert coming out here}.

6. CONCLUSION

The journey from Eilish's quizzical disclosure (or non-disclosure) to the vulgar simplicity of Apollo's offers us a gradient of experiences through which to understand the contemporary closet's overlaps in meaning (as in Sedgwick) and the invasiveness of its scrutiny (as in Foucault's "will to knowledge"). Moreover, the historical context of US celebrity coming out genres allows us to see evolving trends across approximately three decades. In some ways, we can see just how little has changed. The responsive "Yep, I'm gay" of Ellen and the reluctant "I guess I came out today" of Eilish both showcase a target of scrutiny uncomfortably conceding to the public demand for a disclosure that inversely constitutes the idea of a secret, as in Judith Butler's assertion that to "come out" retroactively constructs the idea of having been "in." This means "being 'out' must produce the closet again and again" (Butler 1991, 16). Yet there is simultaneously no way to fathom a world in which Ellen's disclosure could have been made with the direct and sexual language of Omar Apollo. Both because it vividly detects the invasive public curiosity to know what one's sex looks like and because of its responsiveness to a public skepticism

about “queer baiting,” or opportunistic queer adjacency. While “Yep, I’m gay” and “ib sucking dick fr” both aim to dissolve invasive public inquiry, they do so in different terms and contexts: the magazine cover vs. the personal twitter account, “gay” (a sanitized catch all) vs. “sucking dick” (a visceral distillation of the coveted information of sexual behavior). The closet door is open, because contemporary life asks us to put our intimacies on digital display for inspection and judgment. And as much as the closet may not uphold binary distinctions of in/out and speech acts may range from casually shared details of life to a non-verbal cue like a t-shirt (Crabtree 2021), we are all nonetheless standing in the door frame with our interior lives on display for public perusal and investigation. The will to know what “doesn’t really matter” anymore.

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