

**The Inside of Coming Out:
A Critical Autoethnography of Sexual Identity Transformation in Adulthood**

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Abstract

This thesis explored the phenomenon of a reidentification of sexual identity, from heterosexual to lesbian, in middle life. As a source of data, the author used first person narratives to recount personal experience, highlighting three pivotal periods over a ten-year experience that conveyed the deconstruction, recognition, and synthesis of a sexual identity shift. Popular theories of identity formation were referenced in relation to this experience. Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development, where identity is understood to become stable in adolescence, was referenced as a comparison to the author's identity challenge in her thirties. Additionally, Cass' (1984) theory of Homosexual Identity Formation, which proposes six sequential stages that culminate in a disclosure of same-sex orientation, was used to contrast the author's non-linear arrival at a non-heterosexual identity. Finally, queer theory was drawn upon to remove the heteronormative lens from the stories in this study and to critically view these experiences through an acknowledgment of religious, patriarchal, and heterosexist influence that acted to obscure non-heterosexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Throughout this critical analysis, the controversy of whether sexuality is essential or socially constructed was addressed, suggesting an understanding of an interplay between nature and nurture that is mediated by an element of authenticity. The concluding discussion consolidates the findings by addressing three research questions relating to 1) how sexual identity transformation happens in adulthood, 2) whether this change is spontaneous or gradual, and 3) what psychosocial influences affect such a change. The results of this thesis serve to enhance existing psychological understanding of sexuality and identity by offering subjective and intersectional meaning to the current discourse.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the people who have loved me through the process. To my parents, whose consistent commitment to learning and growing inspires my potential. To my children, whose resilience and levity anchors my purpose. Finally, to my partner—my love, my friend, and the keeper of my story—whose patience, love, and belief in me makes all my dreams possible.

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Prologue

Sleep has never been a reliable visitor. It is close to midnight, and I lay in bed wide awake, my body charged with the energy of youth still under the conservative parental rules of a bedtime. My eyes are adjusted to the dark, and the bubble-gum pink of my sponge painted walls bleeds through a liminal veil of shadows. I pull my stuffed rabbit close and absently gaze at collages of magazine cut-outs framing my mirror, the glossy faces of 90s celebrities under a suburban streetlamp spotlight. I drift to my nightly ritual of daydreaming (nightdreaming?) myself to sleep by imagining the story of my future. I envision adulthood, where I am beautiful and charming, surprising everyone with the transformation from my awkwardly budding body. I will graduate high school at the top of my class and go away to university to earn a degree in education before I travel to foreign countries to teach English as a second language—because it's important to be worldly before settling down, of course. When I return, I will marry a handsome man, buy a brand-new house, adopt a labrador retriever, and have two children—a boy and a girl. Then I will turn 30. I can't see what lies beyond 30. It doesn't matter, really because I will have everything in life to guarantee happiness. And I can't wait!

This is a study about entrenched social convention, the disruption of personal beliefs, and the reidentification of sexuality. I grew into adolescence in the 1990s—the decade of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” (DADT), a pervasive cultural theme originating with the U.S. military policy that banned gay, lesbian, or bisexual personnel from being open about their sexuality (Lee, 2022). Masked as an effort to prevent discrimination, this regulation perpetuated the invisibility, silence, and closeting of queer people while supporting the privilege of heterosexual, cisgender dominance (Lee, 2022). DADT was thematic of the zeitgeist of my youth, which was steeped in patriarchal, religious, and heteronormative expectations that assumed heterosexuality as the

dominant standard (Thorne et al., 2019) and were baked into the collective consciousness like bitter morsels of moral guidance.

The 90s were also a time of academic activism, with the third wave of feminism advancing the ever-evolving fight for equal rights, building on concepts like Adrienne Rich's (1980) "compulsory heterosexuality", which addressed the idea that heterosexuality is not an intrinsic human instinct, but an institution imposed by society to subordinate women. This perspective was complimented by the onset of *queer theory*, a term coined in 1991 by feminist writer Teresa de Laurentis (Pearce, 2008) to breakdown the illusion of sexual and gender binaries. Queer theory grew rapidly as authors like Judith Butler challenged the constructs of gender and the effects of heterosexism through concepts like "the heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990), which describes the performative and socially reciprocal nature of assumed roles of sex, gender, and sexuality. These scholarly advancements sparked a surge of queer thought (Minton, 1997), yet the outermost ripples of these movements would not touch my awareness until I approached the horizon of middle life.

I was a sheltered, only child with a vision of growing up into a happy, thriving woman and only knew one linear, hierarchical way of making that happen. I stumbled, with much perceived failure, shamefully checking the boxes of this prescriptive plan out of order yet still having two children (a boy and a girl), getting married to a man (subjectively handsome), and securing a career (not as a teacher). The dog—a rescue who could pass for a lab—would arrive in 2013 when, just shy of 33, I hit the last item on my adult checklist and bought a house with my then husband. This significant milestone was the launch point for this study because it symbolizes the moment at which my focus moved inward, no longer striving for external goals but rather having space to be with myself—whoever this mysterious Self was. I began to assess

these life rewards and see that they did not foster the authentic sense of safety, achievement, and happiness that I had expected. Worse yet, I did not feel loved—by myself or others. This questioning would lead to a systematic dismantling of my life until I bore into the core of my dissonance: a sexual identification that was incongruent with the heteronormative blueprint I had been following.

Introduction

Rooted in psychological perspectives, this study used a critical autoethnography method—a blend of autobiography and ethnographic observation—that involved reflexivity and queer theory to analyse personal narratives along a timeline; depicting a holistic picture of the heterosexual conditioning that affected my coming out process. From the outset of this thesis, it was clear that there were several theoretical components to my experience that called me to investigate the development and the social influence of sexual identity. At the centre of this exploration was the controversial question of whether sexuality is inherent, in line with an essentialist view, or whether it is something that is constructed within relationship, as a social constructionist perspective asserts. Acknowledging sociopolitical and cultural conditions that brought my sexuality into question as an adult, a social constructionist position, which supposes that sexual identity is socially created through societal meaning and interaction (Rust, 1993), was the best way to analyze the relational influences that motivated my perceived subscriptions to social identity categories. In line with this view, Cass' (1984) theory of Homosexual Identity Formation, a sequential stage theory that sees the process of non-heterosexuality as involving social comparison that culminates in a disclosure of same-sex orientation, was used to contrast the non-linearity and non-specificity of my own experience. Despite offering helpful insight, social constructionism presented limitations to a full understanding of my experience, namely

because it theoretically opposes essentialist perspectives that see non-heterosexuality as a biologically determined and stable identity awaiting discovery (Rust, 1993). Often considered to be essentialist, Erikson's (1959) psychosocial stage theory of development, which supposes that identity is established universally in adolescence through a maturation process and aided by intergenerational influence, was referenced as a reflection on my youth and a comparison to the identity shift in my thirties.

A bridge was required to make sense of holding these aspects of essentialist and constructionist thought within the same story. To offer a holistic understanding of the psychology of this sexual identity transformation in middle life, it was imperative to relate to both concepts of constructionist contextual sensitivity *and* essentialist autonomous authenticity. To capture the experience of social influence on identity change while also acknowledging a sense of greater alignment with those changes, this study employed queer theory to acknowledge that systemic heterosexism may have acted on personal experiences to obscure non-heterosexual identification. Further, queer theory was employed to understand that psychological perspectives are often rooted in positivist views (Minton, 1997) and that events, thoughts, and feelings may align more authentically with queer experience when hegemonic assumptions are removed.

Queer theory acknowledges that identity is a construct embedded in cis-heteronormative sociopolitical arrangements and therefore, can be disrupted (Bernal Crespo, 2022). Similarly, language is ever changing over space, social group, and time. The acronym 2SLGBTQIA+—which stands for Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual—is a term that morphs to be inclusive of the non-cisgender, non-heterosexual collective culture. Although these identities share in a common marginalized experience, the process of coming out can have characteristics unique to each subgroup (Guittar, 2013). Where appropriate, I have shortened the

acronym to be specific to sexuality. For my personal identifiers, I focus on the terms LGBTQ, lesbian, gay, and queer to describe same sex orientation, and I refer to my gender as that of a woman aligned with the sex of a cisgender female.

Identity represents a link between self and society and, therefore, it was necessary to investigate this construct not only through broad, cultural methods but also through approaches that consider individual experience (Hammack, 2008). Using an autoethnographic approach to capture my experience allowed this story to be told in a subjective way that was unbound by preconceived questions asked through other commonly employed qualitative practices. Via this methodology, I welcomed the reader through three periods of time over a ten-year experience, expressing the perception of a deconstruction, recognition, and reconstruction of identity, using an evocative narrative for each period as a snapshot symbolizing a turning point of identity change. As a self-exploration story, this began with an awareness of a cognitive and embodied misalignment that led me to disengage from conceptual beliefs, behaviours, and contracts that were counter to my values. Subsequently, there was a sense of sexual orientation discovery as an underlying source of distress which led to a reintegration with relationships and community as a newly self-aware and healthier person. Each of these periods was then analyzed using identity and queer theory literature.

Having this experience in middle life is not well documented in identity research, which is often influenced by essentialist or developmental theories that restrict coming out as a required point of achievement on a normal timeline (Rust, 1993). Through this evolution, I aimed to represent the variation in my sexual identity over time and respond to three research questions: 1) How did my identity transformation happen in adulthood? 2) Was identity transformation in

adulthood spontaneous or gradual? And 3) What have been the psychosocial influences of my identification?

Literature Review

Sexuality

While psychological theories on the development of sexuality have varied over time, understandings of non-heterosexual attraction and behaviour were predominantly pathologized throughout the 20th century (Hall et al., 2021). Sexuality was historically understood to be biologically determined and therefore, stable, binary, and essential (Weber, 2012). This notion was questioned in the mid 20th century by the findings of Alfred Kinsey (1948), who developed a scale of sexuality ranging from 0 = exclusively heterosexual to 6 = exclusively homosexual, covering cognitive and behavioural aspects of sexuality. The data of Kinsey et al. (1948), yielded from thousands of participant surveys, revealed that non-heterosexuality was far more common than initially thought and that a significant number of the population fall somewhere between the sexual binary, pioneering the understanding of a spectrum of sexuality (Haldeman, 1994). Ahead of his time, Kinsey's work was not well recognized, and the scale remains underutilized in academic research, despite its simplicity (Haldeman, 1994).

Views on sexual diversity remained largely pathologized until the 1970s when theories of sexuality were curiously challenged again through constructionist examinations (Rust, 1993). A traditional essentialist perspective sees sexuality as innate and biologically determined (Jones, 2019) and is often used to promote an exclusively reproductive purpose (Plummer, 2003). Still, the essentialist view has been a popular stance for LGBTQ+ activists who argue that homosexuality is not a choice, an assertion that right wing, anti-gay opponents challenge with social constructionist arguments, manipulated to see sexuality as reduced to ambiguous desire

(Plummer, 2003). Jones (2019) interviewed several sexually diverse young people about their experiences with being out. All participants shared this essentialist sentiment, which brought about a sense of pride and belonging, but also revealed a pressure to adopt homonormative expectations which burden sexually diverse people with an implicit directive to adhere to a strictly homosexual standard (Jones, 2019) that see non-heterosexuality as narrowly defined by the genders of people in a relationship (Rosenberg, 2018).

This understanding suggests that essentialist views have a subjective place in identity formation but can inhibit post-positivist theoretical understandings of sexuality as a fluid, spectral experience and may, in fact, perpetuate the limitation of expression among sexually diverse people. Rust's (1993) study with non-heterosexual women revealed a similar sentiment in the experience of sexuality as something secure and true to participants. She concluded that individuals tend to experience their sexuality as stable and essential rather than socially constructed, retrospectively perceiving past experiences as goal-oriented aspects of ultimate sexual discovery (Rust, 1993). This finding supports the current consensus that biological aspects of sexuality cannot be divorced from wider social forces (Plummer, 2003). Rust (1993) called for a social constructionist framework of sexual identity that acknowledges the sociopolitical sensitivity of identity while also appreciating that perceptual experiences are relatively consistent with essentialist goals to match one's psychosexual experience with a categorical achievement (Rust, 1993).

Longitudinal research that followed from Rust's (1993) work supports a social constructionist/essentialist interplay. This can be seen in a study of sexually diverse women who changed their labels of lesbian, bisexual, or "unlabeled" over time, although not in a unilinear direction that assumes bisexuality as a stage that precedes exclusive same-sex orientation

(Diamond, 2008). Similarly, Rosario et al. (2006) followed sexually diverse youth and, while many participants remained consistent with their lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities, there were shifts for some that involved a change of label or an enhancement of same-sex thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, suggesting that sexual identity is in fact fluid over time. As heterosexuality is presumed the default, sexual exploration must lift the lens of a heterosexual schema to reinterpret experiences which might then align with a spectrum of queer essence. While this holds that identity is still shaped by relationship, there is room for a dynamic authenticity that guides the construction of identification. This can be a particularly gradual process for women because heterosexuality gives them more latitude for homosexual experiences by framing them as plutonic expressions (Rust, 1993).

Historically, academic literature has largely reduced topics to be told through a white, heterosexual, male lens, essentializing experiences and rendering queer presence invisible (Henderson, 1993). It was not until the end of the 20th century when scholars began deconstructing common narratives and theories to bring queer orientations out of the proverbial academic closet. The concept of compulsory heterosexuality was raised by Adrienne Rich in 1980 to challenge the silence of lesbian existence in academic literature and to frame female heterosexuality as an institution that disempowers women (Rich, 2003). Rich strove to ignite new perspectives for the heterosexual majority to become aware of their privilege and established heterocentricity (Henderson, 1993). Akin to the discovery that whiteness is a racial identity, Rich made aware the fact that heterosexism is enacted when assuming heterosexuality as a stable norm for all (Howard, 2000). It is now commonly agreed upon that sexual orientation is a construct that is defined by an individual's position on dimensions of sexuality, including

romantic orientation, sexual behaviour, sexual attraction, and sexual orientation identity (Hall et al., 2021).

Identity

Identity was historically assigned rather than selected; a concept that runs contrary to modern aspirations for authentic self-discovery and engagement in ever varying social networks (Erickson, 1995; Howard, 2000). The construct of homosexuality was named in the late 1800's as a clinical taxonomy label and evolved to a pejorative, pathopsychological term into the twentieth century before being assigned more positive and political meaning in more recent days (Rust, 1993). Accordingly, this has become a popular topic revealing several theoretical viewpoints. Most simply put, a social cognitive perspective understands identity as a resource-saving process of realization that efficiently sees identity as a mental schema of oneself that organizes Self within everyday interactions (Howard, 2000). Symbolic interactionism externalizes this by highlighting the aspect of meaning at the individual level and paying attention to how this is conveyed, negotiated, and changed over time and circumstance through interaction (Howard, 2000). Where interactionist perspectives focus more on individual meaning, social constructionism places an emphasis on the creation of identity in concert with one's social experiences (Rust, 1993; Schachter, 2018). This perspective can highlight sociopolitical influences when considering how identification becomes politicalized by opposing the norm. These traditional views share in the modern assumption that identity is inherently stable, rational, and sensitive to these social and cognitive contexts (Howard, 2000).

Modern developmental models of identity, such as Erik Erikson's (1959) popular theory of psychosocial development, focus on identity as the outcome of a predictable stage of life where crisis occurs, usually in adolescence, and follows a linear hierarchy to resolution (Erikson,

1959; Cass, 1984). Hammack (2008) offers theories which build upon Erikson's (1959) life stage model to describe the dynamics of exploration and commitment to identity at different points in development. This model can see an individual in states of identity achievement, moratorium, diffusion, or foreclosure, with the latter representing a continued reliance on early life identifications, internalizing the expectations of family or community (Hammack, 2008). Similarly, Cass (1984) applied stage theory specifically to sexuality with her Homosexual Identity Formation Model, which poses that sexual identity self-images are uniquely perceived with personal affect through six revelatory stages of: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis. Although there have been proposed adaptations to this model, suggesting that some of these stages may be combined, Cass' (1984) theory remains relevant in literature where descriptions of the stages are valuable to sexual identity development discourse. However, due to its linear design, Cass' (1984) model fails to support the experience of women struggling with their sexual orientation, as they tend to move through stages in no predictable order (Kennedy & Oswalt, 2014). Specific to women is also the bidirectional link between the differential experiences of the biology of sexual desire and the psychological emotional experience of affectional bonding (Diamond, 2003).

Rust (1993) discussed the problems of stage theory models of identity in relation to sexuality in a study of women across the lifespan who held lesbian, bisexual, and undefined identities. She argued that the linearity of developmental models discounts the fact that individuals often experience steps in homosexual identity formation differently or non-sequentially (Rust, 1993). Furthermore, developmental models assign a unidirectional goal to coming out, with disclosure carrying a positive weight, and neglect the possibility of sexual diversity outside of a heterosexual/homosexual binary (Jones, 2019; Rosenberg, 2018; Rust,

1993). Rust (1993) argued that developmental models assume an immaturity of an individual still in process of achieving identity which, once reached, signals maturity and permanence. In contrast, social constructionist models account for the need for identities to change to accommodate the dynamic nature of one's social location; thus, a change in identity is viewed as a quality of socially mature individuals (Rust, 1993). Furthermore, many sexually diverse individuals lack the social representation to reflect their same-sex feelings, thoughts, or desires back to them, making their identity recognition a confusing process that may require several attempts at claiming a label before finding a comfortable fit.

The challenge to forging a marginalized identity is that it is always up against resistance created by personal and social meaning enacted by history (Hammack, 2008). It is a post-positivist take on the subject that acknowledges sexual identity as the outcome of ongoing processes of social interaction and historical influence and therefore sees it as susceptible to change or evolution of meaning at any point in life (Rust, 1993). This view sees identity as non-existent and proposes a deconstruction of identification to reveal relational and fluid points of attachment to categorical constructs, which can be challenged. This does not reject the concept of identity but recognizes a unification of basic experience and sees authenticity as a dedication to the discovery of personal values within the changing context of relationship (Howard, 2000). The issue with searching for an authentic self, however, is that it denotes the existence of an inauthentic self. Rebecca Erickson (1995)—not to be confused with the developmental stage theorist of a similar name—cautions against this essentialist thinking and suggests that we are neither authentic nor inauthentic but rather more or less so as we dynamically move through our experiences. She surmises that people feel a sense of inauthenticity when they “hide themselves from themselves” and fail to act on their self-commitments (Erickson, 1995).

Coming Out

Heterosexuality has long been privileged as the standard in Western society (Guittar, 2013), burdening sexual minority people who are saturated in heterosexist expectation with the task of disclosing their sexual orientation as a deviation from normal (Baiocco et al., 2022). The psychological recognition of non-heterosexual orientation can illicit questioning and dissonance which challenges an individual to make meaning out of feelings, behaviours, or thoughts that may counter the dominant messaging about what constitutes moral and acceptable notions of love and attraction. This recognition is often referred to as *coming out*, either through an enlightenment of intrapersonal awareness to oneself or through explicit outward disclosure to others (Guittar, 2013), involving processes as well as events within those processes (Rust, 1993). Coming out is ongoing and involves relational, social, political, and individual aspects of resolution that assign personal meaning to identity development and therefore cannot be temporally captured in a moment or bound by a singular definition (Baiocco et al., 2022; Guittar, 2013; Hurd et al., 2022). Depending on the sociocultural context of an individual's experience, coming out can be an empowering process of authenticity that can foster strength and resilience through the integration of emotions and thoughts arising from the realization of sexual orientation (Baiocco et al., 2022).

Like the definition, the meaning of coming out is unique to individuals and rarely addressed in the literature (Guittar, 2013). A developmental assumption sees the initial questioning of sexual orientation as taking place on an expected timeline, usually in adolescence or emerging adulthood. However, a metaanalysis by Hall et al. (2021) identified several common milestones of sexual identity recognition that were sometimes found to be experienced as late as middle adulthood. This includes self-identifying, questioning, feeling different, awareness of

attractions, disclosing to family and friends, and choosing an identity label (Hall et al., 2021). Even so, there is a general emphasis on coming out as an explicit early life process of personal awareness which culminates with disclosure of sexual identity to family, friends, or colleagues (Baiocco et al., 2022; Pistella et al., 2019). This concept aligns with popular social identity stage theories like that of Erikson's model of identity development (Schachter & Galliher, 2018), which sees adolescence as a critical time of identity consolidation. More specific to sexuality, Cass' (1984) six stage Model of Homosexual Identity Formation proposed a sequential series of growth points that begin with identity confusion and linearly progress to a completion of homosexual identity synthesis. While these models remain relevant to today's literature, they are criticized for their linearity, hierarchy, inconsideration of later life experiences, and negligence of bisexuality (Rust, 1993).

The concept of coming out tends to be considered as part of a homosexual/heterosexual binary, in that if one is not heterosexual, they must be homosexual and therefore either in the closet living in secrecy or out of the closet and open in all public arenas (Rasmussen, 2004). However, when we consider that coming out is only made possible because of the assumed normalcy of heterosexuality, than it can be understood as a politically motivated decision that is selective, gradual, and ongoing, taking safety and relevance into contextual account (Baiocco et al., 2022; Guittar, 2013; Pistella et al., 2019). Many Western countries have "Coming Out Day" initiatives (Lee, 2022; et al., 2019), framing coming out as a personal responsibility of disclosure which also reveals the inherent privilege of the act, recognizing that bias, prejudice, and even violence are real risks for sexually diverse people (Pistella et al., 2019; Rasmussen, 2004).

The concept of coming out as a terminal act of social visibility has been challenged with a process of *coming in* - a way in which individuals reflexively acknowledge their identity as a

form of sexual self-acceptance (Rosenberg, 2018). Rosenberg (2018) interviewed a sample of young, queer adults and discovered themes of coming in which illustrated a gradual, ongoing, non-linear, and introspective process of self-discovery. Participants viewed coming out as a type of social disclosure that only accounts for a fragment of the dimensional experience of non-heterosexuality and is misrepresented as being a final state of identity achievement.

To my knowledge, there is no existing research that attempts to hold both social constructionist and essentialist concepts within a single, subjective experience. Additionally, I have not come across the use of queer theory to enhance psychological models of identity through first-person storytelling. Therefore, this thesis explores my experience of coming out (and coming in) by striving to answer three research questions: 1) How did my identity transformation happen in adulthood? 2) Was identity transformation in adulthood spontaneous or gradual? And 3) What have been the psychosocial influences of my identification?

Method

Critical Autoethnography

Critical autoethnography employs theoretical views to analyze a type of narrative research that conveys the lived experience of the author and connects insights to social, cultural, and political issues (Poulos, 2021). This method requires self-reflection as a valuable retrospective tool for understanding a holistic picture of factors contributing to a period of one's life. The critical and ethnographic components of this method enable the researcher to take the position of observer and use systematic introspection, reflexivity, and theory to bring conscious attention to the interaction between inner and outer worlds (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography sees reflexivity as central to the method, recognizing that stories can change as we explore our relational position to them (Adams & Jones, 2011). By making storytelling central to academic

analysis, traditional boundaries of research can be disrupted, offering space for the invitation of intersectional identities to inform theoretical understandings through subjective knowledge (Joy & Davies, 2024).

I began this study with a process of free writing after reviewing old journal entries, social media posts, and photos to recall a timeline of experience. I settled on three pivotal periods to depict an overarching storyline that recognized an arc of identity deconstruction, identity recognition, and identity reconstruction. I worked cyclically through one stage at a time, creating an evocative snapshot for each period and then expanding on the memory through a more contextual understanding of the time, culture, and circumstances surrounding the experience. I then drew from the literature and used queer theory to reexamine my stories through a new lens, comparing my experiences with existing models of identity and weaving together personal insight with theoretical commentary. Importantly, I allowed for periods of incubation, often for several days, after writing personal narratives. These contemplative gaps allowed me to shift between subject and researcher, reflecting from an objective, observational vantage point.

Critical reflexivity can provide a valuable perspective to support third person research and paint a more comprehensive picture of lived experience (Weger et al., 2019), adding a level of rigor to this practice. This method strives to demystify unknown aspects of a culture or identity by creating familiarity through storytelling (Adams & Jones, 2011), subjectively conveying a lived experience that will resonate with others and motivate a discourse around topics like middle life identity shifts. Queer theory and critical autoethnography share in the disruption of norms by positioning the researcher and the subject as one and removing a heteronormative lens from experience, thereby critically viewing a storyline in a way that emboldens a broader interpretation of meaning.

Autobiographical approaches to research are growing sources of subjective analysis which help to provide a fuller picture of queer lives and the coming in/coming out experience. Such in depth understanding can be seen through autoethnographies by authors like Ettorre (2010) who wrote about her life as a nun, lesbian, and feminist scholar, and Leung (2021) who reviewed sources of personal data to depict his coming out process and called for future research to explore this type of psychosocial development beyond adolescence. The benefit to a critical autoethnographic approach is twofold: not only can we gain insight from personal narratives, but in combination with academic discourse, we might also facilitate an embodied nature of knowledge that helps to reshape theoretical understandings (Joy & Davies, 2024). This type of qualitative approach challenges the notion that “objective” and positivist methods are hierarchically superior in research status (Downing & Gillet, 2011). In gathering more of these first-person experiences, we can see the differences and commonalities that exist at the intersection of queer life and other aspects of a person’s identity.

Queer Theory

In line with autoethnography, queer theory disrupts convention as a post-positivist concept that is applied to sexuality and genders (Plummer, 2003). Queer theory branches from a postmodern and poststructuralist view that identity is formed in relation to a particular sociocultural zeitgeist, and that power structures that control master social narratives can be challenged (Bernal Crespo et al., 2013). Both queer theory and critical psychology emerged following the development of anti-homophobic activism, which gave rise to new terminology to decentralize the norm and disturb positivist thought (Downing & Gillet, 2011). It is argued that we are living in postmodern times where individuation has become central and the choices for identification have subsequently multiplied (Plummer, 2003). Accordingly, queer theory

challenges outdated heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality and promotes the social visibility of non-cisgender, non-heterosexual lives. This is a form of resistance to dominant power, specifically connected to heterosexism and homophobia (Minton, 1997). A criticism of queer theory is that it is too theoretical and impractical (Adams & Jones, 2011), arguing that postmodernism has not put a halt to modern thought (Plummer, 2003) and that the realities of sexually and gender diverse people may not be supported by a call to challenge heterocentric power systems.

I find myself in the roles of a Western, middle class, white, cisgender woman whose change arose from conflict with convention and therefore, queer theory is applicable to my privilege of psychosocial sexual questioning. Queer theory is used to challenge beliefs on the nature of sexuality, sexual meaning, and sexual identity (Plummer, 2003), which I employed through a revision of my previously held heterosexual experiences. This approach analyzed narratives along the timeline of my sexual self-discovery to understand where essentializing heterosexual assumptions were preventing me from viewing my experience in a way that felt more authentic to my non-heterosexual preferences. The common experiences of questioning, self-doubt, and shame are seen in queer theory as politicizing the marginality and existence of sexual diversity and proposes that these are avenues to transformation (Minton, 1997), as has been my experience.

Data Collection

This study followed the guidance of Adams et al. (2015) and Paulos' (2021) APA guide to autoethnography. This process involved locating oneself in the story, doing fieldwork with available archives, and listening out loud (Adams et al., 2015), which entailed the telling and retelling of my story to supervisors and lab participants. Specifically, I began by identifying three

overarching milestones to my story: the undoing as a deconstruction of identity, the awakening as a recognition of identity change, and the reunion as a reintegration of Self with queer identification. Within each domain, I identified one significant story which was told as an evocative snapshot symbolizing a pivotal shift in identity awareness. I worked with each time frame individually and cyclically, using active writing to convey narratives, elaborate with greater context, and reflect on meaning while drawing in critical literature. For some stories, I used personal archival data found in former journal entries, social media posts, and old photos to locate my experience chronologically.

Ethics clearance (REB# 2024-068) was sought for this study, bearing in mind the potential risks of sharing personal stories. Consideration was taken for limiting the discussion of other people involved in narratives and, where necessary, context and names were adjusted to protect the privacy of those involved. Autoethnography can be an emotional experience for the researcher, allowing for helpful perspectives on personal accounts, which may include the embodiment of upsetting events (Poulos, 2021). Care has been taken to manage these concerns with appropriate therapeutic resources.

Part I: The Undoing

I am settling into position on my mat in a yin yoga class, eyes closed, blindly savouring the transition between postures. The room is heated to a swaddling degree, just warm enough to dissolve the barrier between skin and air. I follow the instructor's voice rather than her physical location, which is difficult to track through the filtered glow of dimmed sconces. She hypnotically guides the class into frog pose, a position—or asana—meant to release tension in the hips and pelvic floor. On hands and knees, I align my thighs in lateral splits, making a triangle with the ground, and drop my pelvis towards the floor while my backside stays up in the air, lowering

down onto my forearms, my chest falling heavy, concaving my lower back—the embodiment of an animal in a reverent bow. Over the course of four minutes, I methodically maintain a rhythmic breath while the tissues of my hips burn, and an irritating discomfort charges up and down my spine, igniting my most primal brain regions with signals of chaos and danger. Inhale, exhale, let go. Inhale, exhale, find space. The physical discomfort begins to create a psychological confrontation as my inner dialogue turns alarmingly—yet familiarly—negative, telling me that I am incapable and unworthy of being here, that I am weak, disappointing, not good enough. I resist the impulse to back out of the pose and instead respond with a recently newfound approach of self-comfort and assurance, mentally soothing my body with tender understanding. The teacher slowly guides us out of the asana, initiating a collective groan from the class, and a euphoric crescendo of relief sweeps through my body like a flood of warm caresses—the ecstasy of Samadhi. I am momentarily overcome by an experience of making it through a hardship that had irrationally seemed endless just moments ago. This triumph reveals a spontaneous decision to apply this transcendence outside of my body and my inner voice announces fearlessly and matter-of-factly, “I’m quitting my job”.

We bought our first house in the summer of 2013, when I was thirty-two years old. It was a blue 1950s two-story saltbox situated in a suburban neighborhood not far from where I had grown up. The property had mature gardens that bordered on welcoming neighbors and the interior held original charm with hardwood floors, a fireplace and big banisters, while modern updates, like a finished basement that would be perfect as a home office, appealed to our first-time-buyer wish list. This house was a symbol of peak accomplishment for us, having spent our twenties struggling to establish ourselves in the workforce while raising babies, now ages five and eleven. Almost as soon as we moved in, I could feel a mental weight lifted by checking that

final box. What I did not expect was the space that this would create for examining parts of myself that had been patiently waiting behind the to-do list.

I distinctly remember the moment I injured my back on moving day, as I reached over a cluster of boxes and twisted to lift a large painting away from the wall. An old injury in my lower spine was immediately flared and my muscles were triggered into spasm in what felt like a punishment for aging. I struggled through the rest of the move with ice packs and Advil and within days, I made the choice to begin attending classes at a yoga studio nearby. As my back healed, I was drawn to return to my mat four, five, sometimes eight times a week. I was enthralled by experiencing my body in this new way, seeing it get stronger and feeling new sensations of resistance and opening. My classes also introduced me to yoga philosophy which was grounded in a blend of new-age and ancient Eastern teachings. This environment began to nourish me in ways I had not expected, addressing questions I had always been too afraid to ask. I had long stopped attending church services that preached the Catholic traditions under which I was raised yet I remained deeply influenced by the dogma that saw the “disorder” of my life choices—especially having children before marriage—as a permanent moral failure. While religion has been correlated with deeper happiness and wellbeing, studies have also shown the opposite effect for members of the LGBTQ+ community whose existence runs counter to Christian belief (Gibbs, 2015). Despite not yet knowing my sexual diversity, the strict heteronormative expectation of my religion instilled an inner shame for not meeting the moral requirements. In yoga class, hearing threads of lessons on compassion and unity, rather than ruling commandments of sin and obedience, turned my view of Universe/God/Atman inward, releasing the idea of an all-seeing external judgement for which I was always performing poorly. It no longer made sense to me that my family’s religion was the only truth, negating all other

world religions and philosophies, thus liberating me from the impossible requirements of my indoctrination.

My children were growing and needing less moment-to-moment care while our material accomplishments established a perceived safety, thus relieving some cognitive space for this process to unwind within my naturally contemplative mind for two years, all the while deepening my yoga and meditation practices. I was initially awash with anger for quite some time as my personal reckoning battled outgoing beliefs and then, as my body changed through strength and flexibility, so too did my mind and heart open to a new personal narrative. Classes provided opportunities for me to connect with my inner environment in a way that I had never experienced, through an invitation of curiosity and non-judgement. Slowly, I was able to differentiate between psychological thought and a deeper, intuitive sense. In methodically challenging my body, I could witness my harsh patterns of the mind and make appropriate adjustments to talk to myself in a more supportive way, with a level of patience I would usually reserve for my child or a friend. A commitment that had originally been made to address my physical pain had turned into a discovery of wellbeing that I had not realized I needed.

The release of my religious views removed the unquestionable requirements of a doctrine. This departure created space for a new autonomy whereby I felt the potential of free will and a new agency that empowered the onset of questioning my conventional decisions. This realization—that I could make decisions based on how I felt rather than how I was taught—was still so new that I could only fathom examining external practical choices before eventually moving deeper to concepts like personal identity, sexuality, and gender roles. With this initial shift, it became spontaneously clear that I wanted to leave the job that I had been unhappy with for quite some time. I had been practicing as a massage therapist for ten years with a large

physiotherapy company that was becoming increasingly corporate and moving in a direction that was opposing my values. The decision to pursue self-employment had been unsupported by my husband, but I had been building a small clientele out of a home office and promised him that I would return to a clinical company if my venture failed. The move was seamless and an immediate success. The freedom I felt from this choice filled me with a sense of vitality and purpose, an experience that was short-lived once the sensation of misalignment returned after just a few months. Trusting in the guidance of my deepening practices, I devoted myself routinely to meditation before I would begin seeing clients each day. I sat wrapped in a blanket on my meditation cushion one morning, like many before, and asked for clarity. As I relaxed into quiet space, my breath slowed, my mind cleared, and thirty minutes passed when, just before I reopened my eyes, a voice boomed as if coming through my right ear and sternly said, “*You have to look at your marriage*”. The air left my lungs as it would if I had just learned of a loved one’s death and in that moment, I could not unknow the truth of the path that lay before me.

Three years after we bought our house, I was moving out. I had been growing and healing out of a marriage that had never been healthy, a relationship that had begun when we were both so young and unaware of our own patterns and deeper, conflicting values. I could now see this in contrast to the quality of connection I was building with myself and others. The pain of this separation, the beginning of my Dark Night¹ (Durà Vilà & Dien, 2009), this profound crisis of faith and existence, is ineffable and beyond the scope of this paper. I had dropped the identity of a religious person, then of an employee, and now of a wife and homeowner. It was as if I surgically carved into my life from the outer shell to the core, removing the protective layers and

¹ Dark Night of the Soul is a poem written by the 16th century mystic, John of the Cross, who described a journey of faith through the dark to a union with God. In modern times, the term is used to differentiate between a state of depression and a spiritual rite of passage.

exposing a raw nudity of vulnerability. My sense of self was completely untethered, and I was full of only questions and no answers.

Identity, Embodiment, and Heteronormative Collapse

Erik Erikson was a German psychoanalyst who is well known for his contribution to the psychodynamic understanding of development and coined the term “identity crisis”. Erikson proposed an eight-stage model of psychosocial human development where each stage poses a conflict that the individual must navigate successfully to lead a meaningful and integrated life (Maree, 2021). One criticism of Erikson’s model is that it is sequential and sees identity as being consolidated in adolescence (Maree, 2021), which falls out of line with experiences like my own where identity is revisited and questioned in middle life.

What I can appreciate about Erikson’s (1959) theory of identity development is that it recognizes a psychosocial purpose—that identity is embedded in social systems so that the individual can be identified regarding their contribution to the system (Schachter, 2018). Until this point in my life, I had been building a sense of self through the interactions with my family and friends, reflecting a more macro level relationship with religion and culture, whereby I observed the modelling ahead of me and adjusted my behaviours, thoughts, and interactions, to appease the assumed perceptions of others. While Erikson focused on identity as being a critical issue in adolescence (Schachter, 2018), identity can also be understood as a cognitive ideology that is made manifest through engagement and reconstructed through the life course (Hammack, 2008), potentially through a crisis of Self. In orienting myself toward a new social context through the yoga world, my influences were radically changed, offering a shift in how I understood myself in relation to the beliefs and views of others, a process which Erikson termed “mutual complementation” (Schachter, 2018). This questioning drew me back to an earlier part

of my life in which my core identities were initially established, effectively positioning me back in Erikson's earlier developmental stages to revisit alternative potentials. While these processes of change can operate unconsciously, it can feel abrupt and disruptive when this suddenly reaches conscious awareness. Erikson wrote of identity as a "sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity...experienced as something that 'comes upon you' as a recognition, almost as a surprise rather than as something strenuously 'quested' after" (Schachter, 2018)—a description relatable to my own experience.

Erikson described a sense of bodily vitality when we orient to a desirable identity that draws us through a feeling of alignment toward sameness (Schachter, 2018). In contrast, he acknowledged that aspects of identity can be suppressed if they are perceived as undesirable. Taking the time to intentionally experience my mind and body in curious and unthreatening space through yoga, supported and encouraged by others, offered an avenue by which questioning could travel. In this way, I could be directed toward authentic orientation through spaciouly embodying myself and noticing what felt expansive and what felt aversive. This was not something I could comfortably practice when I was growing up under anxious conditions of obedience and expectation. In my discovery of mutual complementation with the people and classes at the yoga studio, where I felt an energized sense of sameness and direction, I simultaneously became acutely aware of the interactions and environments, like my workplace and marriage, which conversely created restriction and disengagement. Erikson noted that when an identity 'fit' is discovered, it frees and directs psychic energy to make health, sexuality, relationships, and work more meaningful (Schachter, 2018). I was not actively seeking

identity, yet I had unlocked this force within myself that first had to deconstruct what had already been built before it could help me manifest more authentic experiences.

The outcome of a Western yoga practice has been studied, revealing that the longer one routinely practices yoga, the more likely a greater sense of gratitude and meaning of life is experienced (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2013). These benefits arise not simply through the yoga postures but also through the messaging of an intentional approach to the practice, one that teaches compassion for all beings, including oneself, and a guidance to be at peace with oneself, one's family, and one's community (Kishida et al., 2018). This not only works on a physiological level, fostering a sense of calm in the body through mindfulness, but also has a psychological effect of improving the intrapersonal relationship, which then leads to improved interpersonal connections (Kishida et al., 2018). In my case, yoga was stretching (literally and metaphorically) the boundaries of my distress tolerance and showing me that there was an unexplored spaciousness available to me through self-acceptance. As I spent more time in this positive embodied state, I became more aware of the interactions in my days that were out of line with this newfound kindness and a dissonance grew in a way that led me to explore change.

Queer theorists, while focused on issues of transphobia and heterosexism, acknowledge the overarching sociopolitical idea that people operate under power structures that assume cis-heterosexuality and the roles associated with perpetuating these norms. This stems from the work of French philosopher, Michel Foucault, whose theories arise from the acknowledgement that individuals are relationally shaped by, and constantly responding to, sociopolitical and historic forces (Minton, 1997). For instance, queer scholar Judith Butler proposes that gender is performative, and that human physiology has historically been assigned gendered meaning based on narrow constructs (Butler, 1988). Thus, heteronormativity as a power structure captures more

than just sexuality under its umbrella. Early radical feminists saw female heterosexuality as a product of a patriarchal institution, rather than a sexual or essential part of one's identity (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rich, 1980). In this period before my focus on sexual orientation, I was faced with the institutional roles that I had been occupying and questioned the purpose of the conventional structure. I became consumed with wondering why I had subscribed to the rigid developmental timeline of adulthood that saw marriage, home ownership, reproduction, and appropriate vocation a success if it did not deliver a sense of authentic alignment. The dominant power structures through which my identities were formed were essentially invisible, operating as assumed norms by which to direct one's life (Thorne et al., 2019).

These standards make sense for a heterosexual ideal, where women are embodying their positions in a way that serves the master narratives of gender and sexuality. I could strive for things like marriage, and home ownership, and children, but only in doing so with a man. Even the massage therapy profession I had chosen was female dominated and historically sexualized. Paradoxically, it was only through achieving this heteronormative life, whereby I was subjugated to patriarchal power, that I could begin to see an alternative course of existence. This point of questioning is at the core of queer theory which asks us to consider and disrupt all that seems evident in the world through our knowledge, our norms, and our ways of thinking (Bernal Crespo et al., 2022). Through this lens, one begins to see the ways in which we assimilate (Downing & Gillet, 2011) and a sense of separation may be considered. In my case, once one aspect of identity was fractured, a dam of repression was breached and, beginning with a slow surface leak, resistance to the norm and resistance to the idea of normal behaviour (Downing & Gillet, 2011) began to flood the plains of my known world, drowning my delicately crafted ego.

Part II: The Awakening

It's my first time at this cocktail bar. The outside is a modern rustic façade, a new business addition foreshadowing the gentrification of this low income, urban neighborhood. Inside, the space is tiny and trendy, the type of place where the appetizers are seasonal, everyone has forearm tattoos, and the bartenders are called "mixologists". My new friend chose this location for our first official hang out—a more casual setting than the yoga studio, where our post-class chats have become increasingly personal. Seated at a small table for two, I notice how intimately close we are with patrons on either side, and I covertly observe her, stirring my dirty martini with a skewer of three olives while she sips on her G&T. I am fascinated by this person and want to know more about the footnotes that she's offered in our studio exchanges. How did she meet her wife? When did she come out? How did it impact her ex-husband and child? I watch her speak and study her, noticing the tight cut of her hair and a masculinity in the t-shirt, pants, and men's watch she has chosen to wear—quite different from her yoga attire. I am suddenly aware of my feminine contrast; my long, naturally curly hair blown pin straight, my body tightly tucked into an underwire bra under a form flattering sweater with a plunging neckline, wearing make-up and jewelry to accessorize my look. I momentarily reference everything I have learned from secretly binge watching the L Word—a soapy 2000s drama featuring the interconnected lives of beautiful and successful L.A. lesbians—and suddenly wonder whether the server thinks we're on a date! I relax into this idea and refocus on our deepening conversation, sharing parts of myself that I typically reserve for my journal. After hours of conversing, we pay our bills and I stand up to follow her out of the restaurant, bumping into chairs while we navigate our way around the other diners. Maybe it's the martinis, or maybe it's the connection we have just made, but as we move toward the door, I am struck with

the sense of being watched and then filled with a euphoria of being perceived as gay. There is a length to my posture and a levity to my stride that I can only equate with a sense of pride. This is a striking difference from the familiar feeling of being looked at, ogled, judged through the lens of a straight, cis man. Now embodied in contrast, I am suddenly aware of the objectified experience that I have accepted in nearly every shared space I've entered since high school. No, something is different. This is different. This feels expansive and vitalizing and authentic and SAFE! This is an experience of being seen, being witnessed, and definitely something that I cannot ignore.

Before I left my marriage, sexuality felt trivial in comparison to my more conscious and stable constructs of wife, mother, woman, professional, daughter, or good citizen. Yet, in retrospect, it had surfaced as a fleeting question on more than one occasion, always being cast out as irrelevant because I was already married to a man. As I began questioning my subscriptions to religion, the workforce, and marriage, I felt naturally drawn to consider more fringe social conventions, like monogamy and heterosexuality, as modern Western constructs. I thought that maybe if I had the opportunity to date a woman while remaining committed to my marriage, that this would satisfy my curiosity, and everything would get better. This never manifested beyond an idea which ended the moment I articulated the desire to my then husband.

In 2014, two years before my separation, I watched the Grammy awards from bed while my husband worked on his laptop close by. Music artists, Macklemore and Miranda Lambert, performed "Same Love", a song addressing the inequality of LGB rights and calling for the support of same sex marriage (Rolling Stone, 2014). Towards the end of the performance, the hip hop icon, Queen Latifa, appeared on stage and welcomed the audience through a wedding script. Live on television, she proceeded to officiate a mass wedding for 33 diverse couples, many of

them same sex. Surprisingly overcome with a complexity of emotion, I began to sob tears—a rare expression of emotion that had not happened in years. I turned to my husband and, with a lump in my throat, said, “I think I’m bisexual. I don’t really know what that means but it seems like something that is important for me to say”. The conversation that ensued was much like all our communication—ineffective, dismissive, degrading, and defensive. The concept of an open marriage arose before quickly being rejected by both of us as a very real danger to our relationship. I poured another glass of wine, a behaviour that was becoming habitual to my evenings, and retracted my proclamation, pushing any thoughts of sexuality deeply away, devaluing them as nothing more than frivolous fantasies that every woman must have from time to time.

Moments like this, where I was inexplicably emotional and irrationally drawn in, were peppered throughout my life. When I was young, my mother used to tell people that I was a “one friend kind of girl”, always having a very best friend who would be the most important person in my world until a conflict would dramatically break us up. I do not recall ever having explicit sexual feelings for these few friends but rather a starry-eyed sense of admiration, placing them on a “cool girl” pedestal and feeling so special to be in their orbit. I was drawn to girls, even naming my first dog after the teenaged tomboy character, Samantha, from a favourite 80s sitcom, “Who’s the Boss”. When boys began to notice me in high school, I felt special, too, but in a much different way—a way in which I felt competitive, conditionally valued, and momentarily accomplished by capturing their attention, requiring a performance of sorts to appeal to my perception of their desires. Still, my female friends were critical to my life and continued to be a source of reciprocal vulnerable connection, a level of intimate relationship that I could never achieve with men. In my 20s, I had moments of sexualized experiences with women during

alcohol infused nights, which at the time, had been sanctioned by my spouse and even Katy Perry herself—the artist who topped the music charts with her pop hit, “I Kissed a Girl” in 2008 (Perry, 2008), naming a heterosexual fetishization of lesbian behaviour that was pervasive in the culture of the mid aughts (Diamond, 2005).

In my youth and into my 20s, I did not know anyone who was openly living as a lesbian and therefore relied on stereotypes cobbled together by the beliefs of my friends and family and by sociocultural tropes. After all, in Canada, sexual orientation was not legally protected under discrimination law until 1996 and same-sex marriage—a topic of heated debate in my family—was not made legal until 2005 (Hurd et al., 2022). Modes of media had long been the only place where I witnessed queer representation, which always curiously drew me in. The first was through the controversial news coverage of Ellen Degeneres (Badowski, 1997), a comedian in the 90s who chose to use her sitcom as a platform to come out as gay and, consequently, was blacklisted by Hollywood. This taught me nothing about myself but everything about the perception of lesbians. Ellen’s actions undoubtedly opened doors for more progressive queer representation in the early 2000s, when I secretly watched the Showtime series, *Queer as Folk*, and followed up with repeated viewings of the original *L Word*—pioneering television shows that challenged the taboo of depicting gay and lesbian lives. I watched the *L Word* like it was a school project, mentally making notes on symbols of lesbian culture. In 2006, when I cut my hair short after the birth of my second child, I momentarily wondered whether I would now be hit on by women. I could not quite crack the code.

By the time the 2014 Grammys rolled around, I was more sensitized to these thoughts and feelings. I was then in my 30s and attentive to a path of personal growth, opening myself to new experiences and ways of seeing the world. I yearned for and expanded towards people and

topics that were concerned with diverse identities, calling me to challenge known stereotypes and reveal unconscious biases. The mass wedding at the Grammy's compounded this exposure to real sexually diverse people displaying their love, offering me a new idea: that perhaps sexuality was about more than physical attraction, more than simply the act of sex. Something deeper was calling for my attention and it was compounding my awareness that my marriage was not serving my deeper desires of compatible values that were centered in kindness, respect, admiration, and mutual support.

Following my separation, I leaned heavily into friendships for confirmation that I was still in existence, grasping at outreached hands to steady me through my next steps. I had made several new, close friendships through my venture into independent massage therapy practice and my time at the yoga studio where I had developed a sense of belonging and community. The physical and emotional growth I was sensing felt reflected in those around me and my connections strengthened with people who were different than those with whom I had traditionally surrounded myself. Intriguingly, many of these people were gay and lesbian identifying. With my marital commitment removed, I confided my thoughts in a relatively new friendship with an openly queer woman named Lena. Removed from all other aspects of my life, she was unfamiliar with past versions of me and was a trusted and objective resource for discussing my sexuality. Inevitably, this friendship became intimate, and we fell in love.

Our relationship was short lived, happening far too soon after the messy end of a long marriage. But that brief experience of being romantically loved by another woman cracked my heart wide open, exposing a new, raw vulnerability that was simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying, and attentively held in a way that I had not ever before experienced. In that space with her, I felt like I could take a full breath for the first time in my life. There was a sameness, an

ease, and an unspoken understanding through which the sexual, the physical, and the emotional aspects of our connection made sense. It was as if I had been living outside of myself for my whole life, a nomad roaming foreign lands for so long that I had forgotten the known warmth of home. As I unburdened my repressed concerns over to Lena, I experienced a spontaneous realization that I had never felt secure in sexual intimacy with men, recognizing that these previous interactions had been performative without any consideration for my own desires. In contrast, physical intimacy felt transcendent, safe, mutual, and comfortingly compatible when held in female space. When discussing what my future looked like, I could no longer envision a man because this beauty and freedom that I had discovered with a woman eclipsed any interest in male partnership. It was as if men ceased to exist, or rather they remained but became flat, like background characters in a video game, and I actively sought to avoid them.

I did not care to name this change for a long time, maintaining the label of “bisexual” when pushed to describe myself. When my whirlwind relationship with Lena ended, I could hardly cope with the pain, believing that I could never possibly find this feeling with anyone ever again. I did not yet realize that the connection I felt came from being loved by a woman, not specifically from her. I shared my groundbreaking romance and subsequent breakup with my mother, who tenderly (and somewhat surprisingly) accepted my experience. Even still, knowing that I was only interested in dating women, I did not explicitly disclose a change of sexual identity. I was still coming into my own understanding of where I fit, reconciling stale beliefs and stereotypes with the behaviours, thoughts, and feelings I now recognized. Over the course of the next year, I renovated my exterior to match my interior, disassembling the beauty practices I noticed as performative acts for the male gaze. No more make-up or hair dye or push-up bras. I stopped straightening my hair, letting my curly mane fly free, and donated most of my high heels

and dresses, replacing them with androgenous tank tops and ripped jeans. I ran into a friend one evening at the grocery store who almost walked by me but stopped to give me a hug after a double take. “Alicia! I almost didn’t recognize you!”, she exclaimed. “That’s kind of the point”, I replied as I returned her embrace.

Culture, Construction, and Coming In

Vivienne Cass is an Australian clinical psychologist and researcher who is well known for her six-stage model of Homosexual Identity Formation (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014), arising from one of the first queer studies normalizing, rather than pathologizing, the non-heterosexual experience. Cass’ (1984) model, which assumes that identity is achieved through a developmental process and interactions in one’s environment (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014), remains a relevant point of reference today for its understanding of the cognitive, behavioural, and affective aspects of questioning a heterosexual identity. There are many ways in which I connect to the descriptions of Cass’ stages and ways in which I see my experience as out of line with the sequential linearity of her concepts.

Briefly described, Cass’ (1984) stages move hierarchically from an initial period of identity confusion, where an individual begins to see that their behaviour may be perceived as homosexual, to identity comparison where one judges their potential non-heterosexual identity against heterosexual others, to identity acceptance linked to a positive view of homosexuality, then to identity pride in belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, and finally to identity synthesis, where one’s identity is not solely defined by their sexuality. This model was later amended over a decade later by adding “Prestage 1” in which the individual assumes that their identity is in line with the heterosexual majority and views homosexuality as a minority status (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014)—a description that could define my perception up until this point in my story. In

each of these stages, a dissonance is created which motivates action to either see the emerging identity as negatively viewed, positively accepted, or completely rejected, which results in foreclosure and prevents the individual from progressing to the next stage (Cass, 1984). Cass' (1984) model is based on the idea of identity changing through a sequential series of growth points, insinuating that there is an optimal truth to be achieved. In this way, foreclosure acts to stunt our highest potential and keeps us reliant on earlier life strategies.

During this period of my life, I was not thinking about whether I was gay but rather, how I was *not* heterosexual. Like my other identities, I was not replacing them but instead had a sense of shedding them. I felt a release of heterosexuality and a curiosity to seek a “true self”—a very essentialist endeavour—but felt disinterested in claiming a new label just yet, settling on bisexuality as a descriptor of my interests rather than an identifier of who I was as a person. A critique of Cass' (1984) model is that it does not account for bisexuality or pansexuality (Rust, 1993), identities that felt like comfortable place holders which allowed me to honour my past relationships with men and my awakening interest in women. Because sexuality is typically questioned in relation to heterosexuality as the assumed default (Cass, 1984; Rust, 1993), there is a tendency to view sexual identity as a binary choice and therefore assume homosexuality as the only alternative, pressuring sexually diverse people to adopt a homonormative identity that reflects heterosexist ideals (Jones, 2019; Rust, 1993). The only bisexual people I knew were in heterosexual relationships and, without representation, I felt in between worlds.

The Model of Homosexual Identity Formation (1984) was built on assessments of only gay male and lesbian participants, suggesting that the experience of homosexuality is part of a homosexual/heterosexual binary and equal to men and women. However, studies have shown gender differences in the coming out experience, where women take longer to analyze their

behaviour, often moving through these stages non-sequentially, and tend to experience a fluidity in sexual identity (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Rust, 1993). This is because there is a social latitude for feminine expression of intimacy that allows for gestures of closeness between women, such as touching or emotionally sharing, to be viewed as plutonic. Conversely, social identity for men is far less stable because of rigid rules of masculinity, therefore, any disruption of their narrower concept of heterosexuality is more easily broken when same-sex thoughts, feeling, or behaviours arise (Rust, 1993). It follows that women may take longer to acknowledge non-heterosexuality, skipping stages or revisiting prior ones, because of the sheer amount of experience that they may have to reevaluate through a queer lens. In my case, I vacillated between the first few stages of Cass' (1984) model, experiencing moments of identity confusion and comparison before returning to Prestage 1, for many years before I was able to start seeing parts of myself reflected in my friendships with other lesbians.

When I experienced my first same-sex relationship, I was able to clarify what I found attractive in women, qualities that were much less polished than those promoted by pop culture, and I recognized that those aspects were out of line with the image I had so carefully curated for myself. This rattled my expression of femininity and awakened me to the possibility of gender bending my image to reflect a radical inner shift away from the heterosexual imperative. Queer theory acknowledges that sex, sexuality, and gender are enmeshed, performed, and assumed through social and cultural expectation—the heterosexual matrix, as named by Judith Butler (2007). Butler, an American feminist and queer philosopher of gender, asserts that gender is not a stable identity but is contextualized in time and organized through a “stylized repetition of acts” and that a woman’s gender, as subordinate to the existence of men, dictates social meaning for one’s experience (Butler, 1988). As I began to feel akin to my new lesbian friendships, I

could sense a likeness in myself which resulted in an incongruence of how my outer appearance was represented.

While I renegotiated my participation in compulsory heterosexuality, it was necessary to also question my expression of femininity by dematerializing the ways in which I conformed to historical patriarchal expectations. Now that men were no longer relevant to my desired experience, I wanted to decondition the subconscious way in which I drew their attention. Akin to Butler's (1988) theory of gender performance, this framed gender as a social construct that is performed for and maintained by society, rather than something that is a biological natural fact. As such, acts that are discontinuous with an internal experience might be deconstructed to adjust to a more appropriate expression of self (Butler, 1988). Again, this involved reflecting on what I did *not* want to engage with, rather than intentionally choosing what I did want to look like. For instance, I had been straightening my naturally curly hair for years, since an old boyfriend once asked if he could pay for me to have it done permanently. I maintained this look for so long that, at nine years of age, my daughter was shocked to learn that her mum's appearance was manipulated in this way. Butler (1988) asserts that gender is "instituted through the stylization of the body", enacting an agreement with social roles. Putting away my hair straightener was an act of resistance to this invisibly imposed standard, this conformity to being the ideal wife and woman, and my resultant untamed locks became a symbol of my empowerment. Thus, the undoing of my compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) reverberated to my performance of gender and, through the departure from my former identities, I felt a climactic awakening of my non-heterosexuality, still yet to be named.

Shoshana Rosenberg, Australian sexologist, offered the term "coming in" as an introspective concept that honours the nuanced nature of sexual discovery and self-acceptance,

thereby challenging the common notion of coming out's social and political visibility requirement (Rosenberg, 2018). Even though I had discussed my questioning of bisexuality with my then husband, and I disclosed my same-sex romantic relationship to my mother, I did not see either as an act of coming out. Rather, I was very much in a period of *coming in* after my separation, where, released from the constraints of my marriage, I could acknowledge the influence of heteronormativity on my life and distance myself from ways in which I maintained this default mode. I relished the ambiguity of my sexuality and the possibilities that were opening to me. Rosenberg's (2018) analysis of interviews with gay, queer, and bisexual participants, revealed themes of sexual self-discovery, solidification, and a slow progression towards an "authentic self" where the space between realization and acceptance was gradual and sometimes difficult to reconcile. In this space of coming in, I felt a security in remaining open to change and an awareness that my experience was ongoing. In many ways, claiming a label at this time felt limiting and stagnant—qualities that opposed this period of generativity. During this time of *queering* my life through the disruption of my long-held beliefs about who I was supposed to be under the invisible patriarchal, heteronormative reign of society, my sexuality was sacredly attached to my relationship with myself and required a period of internal challenge to emerge with some clarity before I felt comfortable sharing my understanding with others.

In line with Cass' Model of Homosexual Identity Formation (1984), there was an element of sensing whether moving the dial on my sexual identity was perceived negatively or positively. When I vocalized a position of bisexuality to my then husband, I was met with stigma, fetishization, and biphobia, which pushed my budding awareness deep into the closet and led to my doubling down on harmful distraction strategies, like my habitual alcohol use. Conversely, my discussion with my mother several years later was met with understanding and compassion

for my pain, reserving judgement and even too many questions. Research has made evident that queer people who receive negative parental feedback are more likely to suffer from mental health challenges and lower levels of self-acceptance (Rosenberg, 2018). My mother's response supported my self-esteem, validated my grief, and welcomed a deeper consideration of my identification. Furthermore, by not being asked to attach a sexual identity with my disclosure, I could embody this private experience of coming in as a sacred time of intimate self-knowing.

A significant aspect around the consolidation of my shifting feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, was the understanding of sexual versus affectional components of sexuality. Lisa Diamond, a queer psychologist and scholar best known for her research on sexual fluidity, captured the challenge for women like me who were living as heterosexual individuals in an era of fetishizing conditionally condoned same-sex imagery designed for the male gaze. I had been able to rationalize my same-sex sexualized behaviours in the past by seeing them as nothing more than fantasies made manifest. Furthermore, these actions were culturally sanctioned through a rise in media depictions of highly feminine heterosexual looking women engaging in same-sex acts, like when pop icons Madonna and Brittany Spears broke the internet with their kiss on a television awards show, making this femme-femme image of sexuality acceptable because of its appeal to straight-cis men through a phenomenon of "heteroflexibility" (Diamond, 2005). When these expressions became fashionable, I was granted a social license to express repressed sexual desire, albeit under intoxicated and irresponsible circumstances. The downside to this trend is that it trivialized and depoliticized non-heterosexuality by making it an accessory of heterosexuality (Diamond, 2005).

This cultural change, masked as social progress, could perpetuate and prolong *Identity Confusion*—the first stage of Cass' (1984) model of Homosexual Identity Formation. In this

stage, individuals perceive that their behaviour may be defined as non-heterosexual, resulting in confusion and questioning of sexual orientation (Cass, 1984). From an identity standpoint, this liberal “acceptance” of non-heterosexual actions served as a loophole to reinforce heterosexual dominance by extending the boundaries of female behaviour within heterosexuality, making it difficult for me to identify as gay or lesbian. At best, this allowed me to suggest that I had bisexual tendencies, but I remained committed to a perceived choice of male partnership, influenced by the heterosexist, sociopolitical message that this was my natural predisposition because I enjoyed sex with a man and had biological children.

When I found myself in my first same-sex relationship, my assumed myths of sexual orientation and identity were challenged, and my understanding of love was upended. The master narrative upon which I had relied presented homosexuality as a label of sexual desire, connecting one’s choice of relationship exclusively to the act of sex. Because I had been having sex with men throughout adulthood, I assumed that this disqualified me from identifying as a lesbian. And because my only brief, sexualized experiences with women were with those who also identified as heterosexual, I did not understand the difference in potential relationship qualities. In both scenarios, there was a lack of intimacy, safety, and connection that prevented me from feeling a sense of contented authenticity. Diamond (2003) differentiates between sexual desire and romantic or affectionate love as being uniquely guided by different social-behavioural systems that have evolved to serve different goals. Where the former is driven by sexual mating purposes, the latter is motivated by attachment and bonding (Diamond, 2003). Heterosexual cultural norms and practices play a role in linking these aspects of partnership however, sexual desire and affectionate love can operate independently. Once I reciprocally experienced sexual desire in concert with affectionate and romantic love, unified in a same-sex scenario, my understanding of

sexual orientation changed and my concept of sexual identity became much more holistic, allowing for fluidity and dynamic growth in my own identification.

Part III: The Reunion

I turn the deadbolt on the industrial metal door, closing myself in from the outside world, and move to draw the blinds down over the length of storefront windows, careful not to disturb the hooks holding a hanging rainbow flag at the far end that signals out to the urban streetscape. The midsummer sunset filters through, casting a distilled array of color over hardwood floors and white walls and touching cathedral height ceilings, enhancing the minimal beauty and stillness in the sage infused room. I sit at the front desk, facing the door and reflecting on a busy Thursday—three years of Thursdays—where people passed through to meet me for a massage therapy appointment or attend a small yoga class. I feel a familiar swell of grief rise inside my ribcage as I realize that my business—this community studio that I passionately and tenderly built from the rubble of my former life—is now in its final month of existence. I am not ready to leave, tonight or ever, and the fear of “what’s next?” begins to tap on the window of my psyche. I remind myself of the special farewell events that have been planned to coincide with our city’s Pride festival. Sidestepping the approaching grip of sadness, I snap a photo of myself, backlit by the Pride flag in the late day sun, and write a post for social media.

Instagram - July 04, 2019: *“Hanging the big [Pride] flag in the studio this year feels a little bittersweet. The final day of [Pride] will also (appropriately) be the day I close my business’ doors for good. Coming out was a long process for me. Being called to seek more meaning in my life meant questioning all of my conditioning. What was taught, what was learned, and what was true? The more I pulled back, the clearer I could see. And by the time these conversations were being had with family & friends, I didn’t even know they qualified as ‘coming out’. I was so*

distraught by the pain of releasing the heteronormative life I'd built that I didn't give myself space to honour the rebirth. The manifestation of [the studio] paralleled this upheaval. Running this business while in such a raw place meant more than just yoga or bodywork. It became a metaphor for not only making it through adversity but rising above it. A mission of inclusivity, love & transcendence evolved and a diverse community responded. When I decided to claim publicly that we were a queer female owned studio, I was advised by some that doing so might hurt my business. I did it anyway. I refined our company's mission, I modified our website, I spoke on several media platforms, and I reached out to the trans community. I decided that this business would only be run from a place of personal conviction in aligned service and that would never be sacrificed for the sake of selling yoga. In a way, this was my actual coming out. To consciously claim my truth via this incredible platform and remain open to whatever followed set the foundation for the next phase of my life. So, when I hang this flag, it's not out of conformity. It's a celebration of personal victories & a beacon for those who have also found the rainbow on the other side of darkness. [...] I might have been late to the party, but I'm here. Come celebrate with me!"

My marriage ended abruptly and with it came the closure of my home office where I earned a living through my massage therapy practice. In a scramble to relocate my clientele and driven by my inspiring connection to the yoga world, I partnered with my friend-turned-lover, Lena, to open a studio where we would hold yoga classes, and I could have a full-time practice. The generative experience of designing and opening a business while in the throes of an awakening romance would evidently prove to be a poor logical decision, but at the time, it was intensely invigorating and gave me something to pour myself into while the rest of my life was disassembling. We found a location that checked all the boxes on our wish list: street level, two

main rooms, wood floors, high ceilings, lots of natural light, and a preferred location across the street from one of the last remaining gay bars in a yet-to-be-gentrified urban neighbourhood. We secured a small bank loan, painted, furnished, marketed, and celebrated a grand opening—all within five weeks. Seven months later, the whirlwind relationship with Lena ended and for the first time, I truly felt alone. While my mother and stepfather tried to stay connected from their home in a different country, I found myself blindly navigating the languishing bitter end to my marriage, starting over again in a new home, and relying on the questionable success of this new business to support myself and my children. Still, the studio felt like a bright beacon of purpose and potential in my life, and I was determined to see it grow.

When we opened, I was quiet about my evolving sexuality and not open about my newly sparked romance, still very much in my period of “coming in” (Rosenberg, 2018). With Lena gone almost as soon as we had opened the studio doors, I became the sole voice of promoting this entrepreneurial endeavour. I rooted my focus in the premise of safe and inclusive space in the yoga studio industry—a gap I had recognized in Western yoga culture that was dominated by images of straight, young, slender, white women. The studio was a platform upon which I could convey my changing perspectives and demonstrate my aligned values with the queer community while shrouding my private experience. When I became the sole owner, I was called to make known my desires for its mission and to do so without the protective cloak of my former partner, Lena, who had been the queer face of the brand. Stepping into this role, I began having open conversations with yoga teachers and organizations, consistently conveying a top priority to serve the queer and allied community.

The first time I organized fundraising classes to align with the city’s annual Pride celebrations, I found myself publicly claiming that my business was a queer, female owned

studio. In conversation with a group of LGBTQ+ yoga teachers, I expressed my feelings of not being “gay enough”, relying on them to validate the studio’s goal. Ironically, sharing this concern was a step towards connecting to a community with which I aligned, and motivated me to name my identity as a queer, gay, or lesbian woman. Claiming my identification was an important step to becoming a relatable individual, feeling connected to others, and garnering the acceptance of a wider collective to which I enthusiastically wanted to belong. Underneath this desire for group membership was a readiness to relinquish the social privilege of my heterosexual position and to be accepted and protected through crossing some obscure, yet meaningful, boundary into queer culture. I began to publicly name my sexual identity as I transcended an unknown line across the landscape of my sexuality and merged an inner knowing with an outward expression—an experience I would only retrospectively claim as my coming out story.

Through naming my newly embodied role, I was acknowledging the political significance of identity and establishing a sense of security, both for myself and the LGBTQ+ patrons of my studio, now that I was able to find allyship within the queer community. I recognized that I had an image of what it was to be gay, just like I had had an image of what it was to be straight, and that both were two sides of a homo/hetero normative coin. The queer community conversations that passed through my studio revealed a beautiful diversity to me and gave me the confidence, through others’ unique stories, to honour my own. This representation was the key to what I had been missing in my earlier years and, as I fostered new relationships, I became excited about my identity and being a part of a queer group; less focused on what I was *not* and more engaged in who I felt like I was becoming. Despite the pain of recent relationship loss, I also desired to romantically share this newfound certainty.

After years of repressed curiosity over how to tell if women are gay and whether they are interested in me, there was an ease to dating once I was open about my identity. Not long after I re-entered the dating pool, I met my current partner, Jenna, during 2017 Pride. She had a curious wonder for the world and a soft androgenous aesthetic that contrasted my more feminine style and helped me feel visible as a lesbian. This perceived visibility arose from Jenna's more stereotypical presentation as a non-heterosexual woman; her barber-cut hair and men's clothes attracted me to the excitement of gender-bending social convention and, by extension, signalled my own non-heterosexual subscription to others. In many ways, my attraction to a softly masculine presenting woman helped buffer my experience of coming out because our coupled appearance retained heteronormative qualities and perhaps made more sense to public judgement, thereby conveying my sexuality without feeling the pressure to verbally come out to anyone. At the same time, I felt a bold euphoria when we moved through the world together (like that evening in the cocktail bar) that came from a sense of being authentically witnessed.

This familiar feminine/masculine balance also helped me to explore the breadth of my queerness, partly because Jenna was so established in her own. She had been out since the age of 17 and drew me in with her stable aura of self-knowing, the same embodied confidence for which I was yearning. Different from my first same-sex romance, this relationship had a steadiness and security that helped me feel supported while I explored who I was within a healthy female union. I found myself repeating gendered expectations, like feeling responsible for all the domestic duties and withholding my emotional needs. Slowly, through patient communication, Jenna helped me to release old patterns, and I began feeling a type of reciprocal equality that I have only ever experienced within a same-sex exchange. The physical, emotional, and practical aspects of my desired relationship had finally united, and I felt a sense of peace like

never before. Jenna enhanced my journey and bolstered my ability to put everything I had into the success of my business, fortifying my sense of a place within the queer community.

I spent three years with the yoga studio, deepening community connections and stepping into the public eye through media appearances for annual Pride themed events. To my surprise, people did not stop coming. On the contrary, the studio drew an eclectic mix of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, ages, and sexually and gender diverse identifications. I thrived in this fertile environment where my vulnerability was reciprocated, feeling safe, supported, and purpose led. When the studio's building was sold in 2019, I failed to find a new location and made the decision to close, returning to my solo massage therapy practice in a small, single office nearby. After all, this business was always meant to be a team venture, and I was struggling to manage the endeavour alone. Even in knowing that this was the right choice for my wellbeing, I suffered great pain in making the announcement and saying good-bye to the place that carried me through such a sacred transition.

Grief has been a common theme in my sexual self-discovery story—a topic that is often avoided in coming out narratives. Sociocultural instructions had laid the template for my adult life, a Gestaltist² arrangement that no longer functioned after the removal of one piece. The necessary end to my marriage resulted in the loss of friendships, neighbours, in-laws, my house, and my social role as the wife and mother in a culturally acceptable family unit. My sexuality, through my search for authenticity, was the pulled thread that released the whole garment of my storyline, now a loose pile of yarn ready to be restitched. Not only did I feel a loss for what was, but as I solidified my new identification, I felt a loss for what *could* have been—an experience of youth as a queer woman—and I battled feelings of regret for not acknowledging my queerness

² A German theory in psychology based on the principle that the whole of anything is greater than its individual parts.

earlier on. Closing the studio was a symbolic representation of letting go of things that could have been and an honouring to the arrival of my new identification as it now was.

My time with the studio community helped me feel tethered and guided my way through the loss, a path towards others with whom I felt a sameness via an embodied vitality and “mutual complementation”, which Erikson named as an avenue to identity (Schachter, 2018). As the owner of the business, I was there nearly every day, practicing yoga, having aligned conversations, or facilitating bodywork for others—often queer people who had been drawn to the studio’s messaging. With such a consistent focus on embodied presence, the internal voice of expectation that had long dominated my decisions quieted and it was easier to trust in my attraction to people and connections that reflected my own queerness. In this way, my identity was being shaped and constructed through this draw to sameness. Moments of overwhelming sadness were cradled in the embrace of the studio environment and comforted by those who filled it. Seeing queer others living lives to which I felt connected gave me a tangible representation for my bearing. When Jenna came along, she shared in my dream and allowed me space and agency to choose this chapter’s ending, honouring the sadness of a necessary decision and acknowledging the symbol of liberation and transcendence for which the studio stood. In 2019, I closed the business with community support and heartfelt feedback. With my new office just around the corner, I still see people who remember how special the studio’s existence was. They recall an inviting, intimate, and non-pretentious space to explore their yoga practice, nestled like a pearl in the rough shell of a vibrant urban neighbourhood. I privately carry this memory close to my heart as the muse that bridges me to myself.

Without the stress of running a business, I quickly felt the opening of a refreshing cognitive space and the curious tug of potential. Just after my 39th birthday, I was spontaneously

struck with the desire to return to university and enhance my career through deepening my understanding of psychology. A year later, I found myself in an Introduction to Queer Studies class—the first of its kind offered in a Canadian university (Renić, 2020). As I learned about the history of Canadian human rights law, the pathologizing of 2SLGBTQ+ existence, and the roots and reclamation of queer culture, I was moved by how little I had known and grateful to feel a part of this lineage. Above all, these teachings illuminated the inherent privilege that I possessed, not only when I lived as a heterosexual woman, but also when I was able to take action toward a deeper call to change. I recognized that many women in my position would not have the means, ability, or resources to enact the type of decisions that I had made. Suddenly, any feeling of not being “gay enough” dissolved and my grief over not being able to have my twenties back to experience them as a queer woman was replaced with a deep gratitude for the privilege that allowed me to leave a heteronormative life and live with a more aligned identity. With this recognition, I no longer felt “late to the party” but began experiencing a beautiful period of my personal development journey that will only, if I am fortunate enough, continue to evolve across my lifespan.

Community, Grief, and Privilege

Revisiting Cass’ (1984) six stage Model of Homosexual Identity Formation, my experience of coming out aligns well with her final stages of Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis. Although I did not have an experience of consecutive stages, I felt the sense of arriving at a still point after a lengthy period of ambiguous de-identification where I privately spent time coming to terms with the ways in which I was not heterosexual. I did not necessarily experience the comparison of myself to heterosexual others, as in Stage 2 of Cass’ (1984) model where one is faced with feelings of alienation from the heterosexual majority upon

realizing their own sexual diversity. Nor did I struggle with tolerating the idea of sexual diversity, as Cass (1984) outlines in Stages 3 where there exists a tolerance of one's non-heterosexuality rather than an acceptance of it. However, the final concepts of Cass' (1984) model accurately depict what I would describe as the beginning of coming out. Parallel with research findings, this process did not have defined boundaries and would continue to be called upon and navigated, depending on the context of social requirements (Baiocco et al., 2022; Guittar, 2013; Hurd et al., 2022). According to Cass' (1984) framework, *identity acceptance* arises from increased contact with queer subculture, encouraging a more positive view of non-heterosexuality. It is a relatively peaceful time in which identity disclosure to others is still selective. This privacy was the case until I took over as the sole owner of my studio, when my claim of being a gay woman became more public. As positive feedback through a growing community was received, I developed a sense of *identity pride*; feelings of loyalty to my group membership and a recognition of society's stigmatization of sexually and gender diverse people (Cass, 1984). This sense of a wider belonging was critical to my change in identity which was shaped by a larger collective of queer sameness, not just through an individual with whom I shared a romantic connection.

LeFevor et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis that explored a correlation between connectedness and health outcomes for LGBTQ+ people and found that a psychological experience of belongingness promoted mental health, wellbeing, and physical health. The analysis discerned between behavioural and psychological factors of connectedness that contributed to queer wellbeing, with the latter being more effective. This is to say that when studies understood connectedness as a psychological perception of closeness or belonging with LGBTQ+ individuals, rather than solely behaviourally related to communities or events, health-

related outcomes were stronger (LeFevor et al., 2024). The authors further noted that the role of connectedness was most beneficial for older people, with the correlation between connectedness and health-related outcomes virtually null for 20-year-olds, significant for 30-year-olds, and even stronger for 40-year-olds (about 1 *SD* above the mean). Although the results showed that connectedness is not the same for all people or equal across all contexts, connectedness with LGBTQ+ communities clearly promoted flourishing, however, did little to diminish suffering (LeFevor et al., 2024).

In my experience, my sense of belonging only came about through interpersonal connection with other queer people, mostly through my studio. Prior to coming out, I was behaviourally drawn to LGBTQ+ events and news, being a vocal supporter of queer rights and attending my city's Pride parade every year, but I always felt like an ally or an outsider. It was not until I broke my heterosexual contract and began embodying my own queerness that I could have authentic conversations with others and begin to feel a bond. I would agree that my age had something to do with the ability to know myself in a deeper way and thus draw me to healthier connections in environments that were not bars and clubs—historically common gathering grounds for LGBTQ+ people that, while helpful in fostering connection, may also inhibit wellbeing through the encouragement of substance use (LeFevor et al., 2024). Through my business, I unknowingly constructed a space for my own community that was bolstered by the wellness practice of yoga. Because I had the support of family and friends, and because I did not experience struggles with internalized homophobia, I did not so much need a community to help alleviate minority stress—a type of excessive social stress that individuals from stigmatized social groups are exposed to because of their minority position (Meyer, 2003). Because I had not lived openly in my new identity for very long, I had yet to recognize the impacts of membership

in a minoritized demographic. I did, however, desire the affective enhancement that results from positive connectedness and belonging. Knowing that I had a place in the queer community helped me feel as if there was a reason for my loss, an outcome that seemingly justified the pain and anger that came from eviscerating my heteronormative life. This belonging was something for which I searched and found through a greater sense of affirmation in claiming my queer identity.

By stepping into the role of an open lesbian business owner, I signalled a welcoming of queer community members who demonstrated a diversity that was helpful to my continued learning. This was furthered when I closed my studio and returned to university, studying queer theory and feminism for the first time. These disciplines introduced me to queer theory's promotion and celebration of variations of sexual and gender identities as "cultural forms independent from rather than imitative of heterosexuality" (Hurd et al., 2022). This idea helped me to view my sexuality as part of a cultural identity and bonded me to a lineage of queer others. Importantly, queer theory's teachings freed me from the persistent idea that LGBTQ+ lives were still required to conform to the standards of a heteronormative society and instead opened my mind to the need for society to expand to include the uniqueness of the queer spectrum. This philosophy addressed my fear of not being "gay enough" by clarifying my perceptions of what it is to be gay. I recognized that, just as I had struggled through a sense of failure to meet heteronormative requirements, I also believed that I could not fulfill my rigid idea of what it was to be queer because I had biological children with a man and had lived as a straight woman.

Prior to making personal connections with queer people and delving into an academic understanding of queer theory's challenge to sexual and gender norms, I was trapped in an ideology of *homonormativity* that was still governed by dominant social systems, reflecting a

notion that there is an ideal way to represent one's non-heterosexual identity by assimilating into heterosexual standards and fitting into the other side of the straight/gay binary (Jones, 2019). In line with Butler's (2007) concept of the *heterosexual matrix*, this sociocultural enmeshment of gender, sexuality, and sex became a performance transferred onto non-heterosexual expectations. By immersing myself in post-secondary feminist and queer teachings while also tending to my new relationship with Jenna, I began to understand how sexual and gender identities are performed, fluid, and unstable (Butler, 1988), helping to further release and recognize the effects of my own cis-heteronormative conditioning. I recognized that claiming a label of identity was crucial to my ability to understand myself and find community. However, I also understood queer theory's claim that any label is malleable as it will continue to be exercised, reinforced, and claimed through social interaction across the life course (Hurd et al., 2022).

Lucy Jones, an ethnographic researcher at the University of Nottingham, used a queer theory lens to analyze interviews with gay and lesbian youth on the topic of coming out. She concluded that there are normative expectations that shape common narratives of coming out, namely through the adoption of "gay" or "lesbian" labels to categorically differentiate from the dominant standard of being heterosexual (Jones, 2019). She also identified the tendency for queer participants to relate to a biological determinism of non-heterosexuality through which their behaviours and tendencies were coded, claiming that they embodied essentialist actions that were evident to others before they were aware of their own sexual diversity (Jones, 2019). This type of essentialist thought has been critical for advancing equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community; however, it can also restrict the spectrum of expression for queer people by neglecting the role of social constructionism in shaping a dynamic sense of one's unique sexuality. The time I took to comfortably name my sexual identity was a result of this conflict

between wanting to be an authentic version of myself and resisting the social limitations of identification. Ultimately, I appreciated the use of labels like gay, lesbian, queer, and even bisexual for a time, because these terms connected me with others and helped me know myself in relation to a cultural heritage that gave my experience meaning and political protection.

Although I feel that my queerness dials into a deeper version of myself, I do not rely solely on the idea of an essential or natural truth to understand who I am because this would risk rejecting my previous identities, which felt temporally honest to me and are a part of who I am today.

Embracing a totality of who I was as a heterosexual person while expanding into the comfort of a new, queer identity was accompanied by a complexity of emotion—mostly a youthful joy of new experience that helped me feel more whole, but also a pain of isolating loss that felt difficult to articulate. Despite being in my middle life, this was a formative developmental time for my sense of Self, and, as with all transitions, there were parts of that Self that needed to be surrendered to the process. Thacker Darrow et al. (2022) studied the type of ambiguous loss—an unclear loss that sees no boundaries of closure—arising from the vulnerability unique to the LGBTQ+ minority experience. The authors used interviews to focus on the period when individuals recognize a minoritized sexual identity to reveal a loss experience involving the relinquishing of heterosexual privilege (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022).

Interviewees described navigating familial expectations, facing homophobic messaging learned in early life, and breaking religious tradition leading to identity conflicts and experiences of feeling uncertain and fragmented. External losses were also noted, involving the loss of relationships, secure housing, physical safety, financial support, and access to social groups — aspects that were considered part of heteronormative privilege (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022).

The grief I experienced over the loss of my heteronormative structure felt unspeakable because I did not want to appear ungrateful for the wonderful life that I had gained from the change. But secretly, I felt a sadness for the social acceptance that I had lost, the way my former family was welcomed and validated by society without question. My new life, one where I showed up with a same sex partner, biological children, and no wedding ring, felt like something I had to explain, defend, and protect. This strain further extended to my children; to a sense of transferring this challenge onto them whenever they were faced with explaining their family. I missed a time when I made sense to everyone even though that life had not made sense to me. At the same time, I also grieved a life that would never be a part of my story, an idea of my younger self on a journey of discovery as a confident, queer girl and young woman. I would listen to the stories of my partner, Jenna, and dream of being in the same lesbian party scenes of her youth, wondering how much suffering I could have saved myself had I been more aware of my deeper orientation. At the same time, an image of life without my children felt unfathomable. Because of the support of my family, select friends, my new partnership, and my higher education, I was able to reconcile these feelings, and I was left with a mix of gratitude and guilt for the privilege that I still possessed which allowed me to leave my marriage and pursue more aligned life choices. Despite losing the ease of social acceptability, I had gained a self-acceptance that radiated a contentment to all parts of my life. Furthermore, I recognized that the loss I experienced was not as much a result of my actions but was manifested through social intolerance and ignorance.

It has been over a decade since I bought my first house and unknowingly initiated a cascade of undoing. This story of progress, loss, and return is ubiquitous within feminist narratives that risk oversimplifying complex histories (Henderson, 2018). Monique Wittig, a

French author and queer feminist philosopher, is known for her essays on lesbian identification and the unquestioned status of heterosexuality (Henderson, 2018). Sexuality, Wittig asserts, is produced through the social relationship of institutions and discourses of heterosexuality, which act as a given social contract. Thus, my experience of “de-heterosexualizing” can be understood as an act of overthrowing dominant oppressive regimes of a straight society (Henderson, 2018). As I now find myself in a spacious synthesis of my sexuality, I view my identity as political in this way—an acknowledgement of being seen as outside of the occluded given—and find pride in knowing that I am not alone. I now feel a part of this complex history of queer, feminist storytelling and recognize that my sexuality is not only an imperative political statement of identification, but also an avenue for the way in which I experience my relationship to others and the world. Without this call to question my heterosexual contract, I doubt that I would now have access to the rich curiosity, compassion, and appreciation that now critically guides my way.

Discussion

This study aimed to answer three questions: 1) How did my identity transformation happen in adulthood? 2) Was identity transformation in adulthood spontaneous or gradual; and 3) What have been the psychosocial influences of my identification? To respond to these queries, personal narratives were evocatively shared to capture turning points in my experience of identity transformation, which began with challenging identities unrelated to sexuality and initiated a cascade of change that led me to confront my thoughts, feelings, and behaviours around my sexual orientation, connecting me to a core sense of Self.

How did my identity transformation happen in adulthood?

My identity transformation was initiated by a distracting sense of inauthenticity that began after the developmental achievement of a predetermined set of adult accomplishments. From a

psychosocial perspective, inauthenticity arises when one fails to align their actions with their self-commitments, leading to a sense of self-estrangement (Erickson, 1995). Acknowledging that the Self reflects society (Erickson, 1995), this discomfort called me to examine my position within all aspects of my life. The growing dissonance I felt drew me to practices of self-reflection via yoga and meditation—activities that were introduced following a physical injury. Flowing from the reflective immersion of these practices were decisions to remove myself from systems that were operating in contrast to my personal values, namely taken-for-granted standards of patriarchy, religion, and heterosexism. These changes included leaving a job, a marriage, and a home; eventually leaving nothing to obscure the reality that I was living out of line with my sexuality and, as such, was existing uncomfortably by heterosexual standards. This is comparable to being entangled in the concept of Judith Butler's (2007) heterosexual matrix, which describes the interplay in the performance of gender, sexuality, and sex to maintain a socially sanctioned heterosexual role. In the wake of these departures, there was a period of about a year when I did not identify with a new sexual identity but rather considered the quality of my non-heterosexuality; now considered a state of moratorium, where the exploration of identity potential takes place (Hammack, 2008). After experiencing intimacy in a same-sex relationship, and growing LGBTQ+ friendships within a wider queer community, I felt comfortable claiming a new identity as a lesbian, gay, or queer woman—a statement of sexual identity resolution that is recognized as a goal-oriented point of achievement (Cass, 1984) and often likened to the concept of “coming out” (Baiocco et al., 2020).

These shifts in my identification are supported by a social constructionist view that sees my early self-image as built upon the requirements of my sociocultural environment and understands how my identity was subsequently challenged and reshaped by new representations that I

encountered in adulthood. However, the predictability of my identity formation does not align with the developmental stages of popular social constructionist theories. For example, Erikson's (1959) Model of Psychosocial Development sees identity as developed through a conflict of Self and consolidated as a self-image where one understands themselves through their contributions to a greater social system (Maree, 2021). While this accurately reflects the importance of social influence on identity formation, Erikson (1959) also emphasized that this stage is a critical task of adolescence and results in a stable self-schema that benefits adulthood (Maree, 2021)—qualities that do not match my experience. Perhaps this was because I committed to an identity that was valued by society rather than landing on an image of Self that felt more authentic to the feelings that were stifled by conventional expectation.

In this case, it is more accurate to view my earlier heterosexual identity as the result of *foreclosure* rather than one of achievement, where my development did not culminate in an authentic representation of my inner experience but was stunted by a rejection of budding feelings, thoughts, and behaviours. When identity is not supported into fruition and foreclosure takes place, the individual continues to rely on early life identifications, internalizing the expectations of others (Hammack, 2008). Upon reflection, there were critical moments in my early life, in the 1990s and early aughts, which called upon the exploration of a non-heterosexual identity. I chose to foreclose on such ideas because of sociocultural and historic factors like lack of representation, an inability to access resources, and an overriding influence of heterosexist, religious, and patriarchal messaging. This foreclosure was a commitment that carried me through the decision-making of my “adult checklist” that saw the linear and sequential milestones of post-secondary education, career, heterosexual marriage, home ownership, and children, as honourable achievements.

Interestingly, rather than foreclosure being a state of resolution, it was instead a temporary placeholder and challenged when a renewed crisis of identity took hold in my mid-thirties by way of inauthenticity. Once the achievements of my prescriptive life were exhausted and I was exposed to increased LGBTQ+ presence in my environment, I was able to revisit my sexuality through a new lens. Like Erikson's (1959) stage model, Cass' (1984) model of Homosexual Identity Formation views the development of sexual identity as linear and hierarchical, with the synthesis of a non-heterosexual identity posed as a desired, final state. While Cass' (1984) work is valuable to understanding the exploration of my identity, it also does not include the non-sequential, later stage, often ambiguous aspects of my experience. The return to questioning sexuality as an integral aspect of my identity is more in line with research that challenges the stability of stage theory models and empirically supports the potential of changes in sexual identity across the lifespan, especially for women (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Rust, 1993).

The experience of (in)authenticity as a guiding force in the development and breakdown of my identity leads to the suggestion of an essential truth that exists within oneself. However, social constructionism rejects the idea of essentialism because this would contradict the central idea that identity exists in relation to society rather than as a reflection of an inherent truth (Rust, 1993). Queer theory also challenges essentialism by promoting the idea that sexuality and gender are fluid, performative, and responsive to sociopolitical and historic forces (Bernal Crespo et al., 2013). Importantly, as Rust (1993) acknowledges, people experience their sexuality as stable and, following a recognition of non-heterosexuality, they retrospectively perceive aspects of their experience as leading to a goal-oriented state of arrival into a truthful sexuality. When you consider this with Erickson's (1995) claim that authenticity is not a static point but rather an experience of more authentic or less authentic, one can see that there could be a similar spectrum of essentialist

quality that plays an integrally dynamic role in directing an individual towards the social resources necessary to construct a more personally accurate identity. Embodiment was a key feature of this bridge to authenticity. Through a dedication to the practices of meditation and yoga at the outset of my identity transformation, I experienced a deeper compassion for myself, initiating an understanding and examination of my social roles. Erikson (1959) acknowledges the role of embodiment in orienting us towards others who reflect a “sameness” (Schachter, 2018), thereby complimenting the aspects of ourselves which we desire to see magnified.

Was identity transformation in adulthood spontaneous or gradual?

Before beginning this study, I believed that the awakening of my queerness was spontaneous—a realization that suddenly arrived once I was relieved of the limitations imposed by a heterosexual marriage. Upon review, this is not the case. Counter to identity models, like those of Erikson (1959) and Cass (1984), the feminist researcher Paula Rust (1993) suggests that lesbian and bisexual women can continue to undergo periods of alternative identification, uncertainty, or ambiguity well beyond the conventional developmental stages of adolescence and emerging adulthood. When considering the influence of heterosexual, patriarchal, and religious norms, I can see that the queer thoughts, feelings, and behaviours at different points of my development were obscured by heterosexist assumptions used to justify or negate my experiences. These assumptions are in line with the belief that everyone is heterosexual and, as such, social contexts are viewed with heterosexual intent.

According to Butler (1988), identity is constructed and performed to support this social story and individuals within these experiences are contriving their actions to match the appearance of acceptability for the social audience. As the culture evolved to include aspects of lesbianism in the mainstream, there were points at which I tested the limits of my sexuality through socially condoned

behaviours that allowed for heterosexual women to fetishize lesbian behaviour (Diamond, 2005). Within socially acceptable setting, like bars and parties, I explored the concept of bisexual identification, always inevitably casting out these parts of myself. Yet there always remained a compelling attraction, sexual and non-sexual, to women and a desire to be connected to LGBTQ+ lives.

Unlike Cass' (1984) Model of Homosexual Identity Formation, I did not experience sequential stages that began with identity confusion and culminated in identity synthesis. Rather, I vacillated between questioning my sexuality, engaging in same-sex sexual behaviour, and foreclosing on the possibility of non-heterosexuality repeatedly throughout my adolescence and early adulthood. Erving Goffman's (1963) theorization of stigma is applicable to the rejection of non-heterosexual identity. Goffman highlighted the desire for social acceptance and proposed that attributes of non-conformity signalled a risk for hostile reactions from the majority (Patel, 2024). Patel (2024) extends this work to include the act of denial as a factor that inhibits coming out for lesbians, describing a resistance to queer sexuality and, more aptly, a prescriptive enforcement of heterosexuality. Where Patel (2024) spoke to the social reaction of parents, I understand this force of denial as an internalized response that existed between acceptance and rejection, keeping me stuck in the only role I had known—one of heterosexual performance.

Prior to coming out, I also spent a significant amount of time in an ambiguous state of sexual self-identification, now understood as a period of moratorium (Hammack, 2008), where I did not feel the need to adopt a new identity, but I was deeply engaged in the consideration of ways in which I was not heterosexual. This involved learning about the influences of dominant sociopolitical and historic forces that prioritize heterosexuality as the assumed norm (Guittar, 2013). This reflexive period aligns with the concept of "coming in" (Rosenberg, 2018) by the way in which

I privately became familiar with my own wants, feelings, and desires, thereby enhancing my sense of Self and challenging any former bias of non-heterosexuality. Ki Namaste, an author of queer politics, captures this state of ambiguity by suggesting that being entirely inside or outside of heterosexuality is impossible, as the constructs of homosexuality and heterosexuality require a person to position themselves in the other role before claiming their own identity (Namaste, 1994). In this way, it can be seen as virtually impossible for my identity transformation to be spontaneous.

What have been the psychosocial influences of my identification?

Being raised as an only child in a white, Catholic, Western, middle-class home during the 1980s and 1990s meant that the influences shaping my early self-image were a narrow prototype of mainstream convention. Psychosocial factors that influenced the way in which I viewed my sexuality were insidiously engrained in societal standards that ranged from cultural depictions to interpersonal expectations. Within social systems, non-heterosexuality was widely unaccepted; a stance that was reinforced by the lack of legal protections for LGBTQ+ people and the existence of policies that perpetuated inequality (Lee, 2022). Culturally, lesbian experiences were presented in television, film, and music in a stereotypical light, either by accessorizing female sexual fluidity for a male gaze (Diamond, 2005) or by highlighting controversial vehemence (Badowski, 1997). Within my home, the Catholic membership of my mother and stepfather coloured the values that were imparted on me—values that upheld traditional gender roles, heterosexual behaviour, and modest femininity—and guided the expectations of moralistic living. This doctrine landed negatively on my sexual self-expression and bodily autonomy by suppressing any curiosity for thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that ran counter to Catholic teachings. Any rejection of queerness I may have experienced could, in part, be viewed as a protective factor linked to the strong

correlation that has been found between religiosity and negative mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ people (Gibbs, 2015). These findings can be based on religious judgments of morality that see procreative heterosexuality as the only acceptable orientation. A secular extension of this was the often-insidious messaging of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), where heterosexism is covertly and unconsciously enacted through the dominant assumption that heterosexuality is the norm (Howard, 2000), acted to obscure any recognition of non-heterosexuality in my early life. When I would experience non-heterosexual questioning or opinions that supported ways of living outside of Catholic teachings, I would inevitably experience self-doubt and shame, qualities that queer theory views as an avenue to transformation (Minton, 1997), which would eventually become true for me.

Although I managed to align with the conventional standards of heteronormativity that guided my way into adulthood, I lived with an undercurrent of anxiety that made me feel as if I was not getting things quite right. As much as pop culture was dominated with heteronormative messaging, in the early 2000s, I managed to find more fringe television programming—like *The L Word*, where I would observe women living in lesbian relationships—and was drawn to any content that had to do with equal rights for LGBTQ+ folks. These representations of queer lives primed me for developing friendships with queer people. When I became part of the community at my local yoga studio, I was introduced to sexually diverse people for the first time and was drawn to friendships that facilitated the questioning of my own sexuality. These interpersonal connections support a social constructionist view of identity because I was attracted to a quality of sameness in queer others (Schachter & Galliher, 2018) that helped me to open to the possibility of my own sexual diversity. I was able to learn, on a personal level, how perceptions and experiences of these people compared to my own and I could see new parts of myself reflected in them. Especially

within one friendship, that would evolve into a romantic same-sex relationship, I was able to communicate long unspoken feelings and understand myself through her lens of an out lesbian woman who had also been married to a man in her younger years. These interpersonal relationships did not add to who I was, but rather enhanced and nurtured a rejected part of my sense of Self. They were also critical in my eventual change in identification because I was able to position myself within a non-heterosexual context by personally knowing LGBTQ+ people's lives (Namaste, 1994).

I grew comfortable exploring my non-heterosexuality within a broader context when I opened my yoga and bodywork studio and made it my mission of the business to serve the queer community. Through this professional messaging, the studio indirectly became a platform for my coming out to the wider public and cultivated new relationships within the queer community. Through this venture, I was confronted with beliefs about not being "gay enough" and, through the diversity of representation among the community members I met through the studio, became comfortable identifying as a lesbian. This connection to community provided me with a sense of belonging that research has identified as a source of protection against loneliness and a supportive agent for positive health-related outcomes (LeFevor et al., 2024). Further to this, upon my return to university where I studied queer theory and feminism, I found a continued sense of belonging to a lineage of queer others through learning about the history of women's rights and queer activism. Through my studies, I was able to review my own experiences and see them as fundamentally different from the ways in which they were enacted and perceived. I had a deeply emotional response to these teachings that helped to make sense of the long-held feeling of not getting things "quite right", remedied by this important new factor of belongingness (LeFevor et al., 2024). Shawn Ginwright, who studied Black youth and coined the term "healing centred engagement", attributes a sense of belonging to a community as pivotal to the healing of trauma within members of a

minoritized group (Ginwright, 2018). The belonging that I found as a queer community member through my studio and my studies was critical to a positive self-esteem necessary to bridge my identification transformation.

Implications and Limitations

When analyzing experiences of sexual diversity, it can be challenging to use the boundaries and predictability of psychological theory alongside queer theory—a discipline that promotes the destabilization of established systems and the fluidity of sexuality, gender, and identity. This study suggests that the use of queer theory can serve to enhance and extend psychological perspectives, which are traditionally rooted in heteronormative standards that see non-heterosexuality as something to be explained outside of a norm (Jones, 2019; Minton, 1997). The use of queer theory in psychology supports a move away from the minoritization of groups and towards a resistance of hegemonic ideas of gender and sexuality that perpetuate the problems of patriarchy and heterosexism (Minton, 1997). There is growing scholarly discussion around the ways in which queer theory helps with “queering” research, not simply through its ability to deconstruct hierarchical structure and binary-based thinking of gender and sexuality, but also by encouraging researchers to remain open to an ever-changing landscape of psychosocial experience (Lesutis, 2023).

Placing a queer theory lens over psychological models offers a more comprehensive picture of lived experience by ensuring that minoritized experiences, in this case, those of sexually and gender diverse people, are represented. When studying psychological models and existing research, queer theory reminds us to question whether LGBTQ+ people were included or how they were represented, thereby understanding the external validity of results in a way that encompasses a greater population. Where non-heterosexual representation is invisible, queer theory can add to

findings by offering a critical perspective outside of a heteronormative assumption, thereby expanding a greater view of psychosocial function. In employing queer theory for this study, I was able to analyze personal narratives beyond the intrapsychic experience of identity transformation; not simply asking *how* this phenomenon took place but also getting to a deeper understanding of *why* this change needed to happen by deconditioning my previously constructed perspectives. This way of (un)knowing, a way of challenging prescriptive thinking (Lesutis, 2023), is helpful when considering the duality of the essentialist versus social constructionist argument in psychological identity formation models.

Early theories of coming out saw the development of non-heterosexual identification as socially constructed and believed that once a person recognized this difference, they retrospectively looked for evidence of same-sex thoughts, feelings, or behaviours, to construct a story that gave meaning to their identity (Rust, 1993). While my experiences are in line with social constructionist theory, there is also an undeniable element of essentialist quality that that served as a guiding force, attracting me to the people, environments, and teachings that helped reflect a more authentic version of myself and resolve past inner conflict. To me, this matches with Erickson's (1995) views of authenticity—that while there is no singular essential self to discover, there exists a unique experience of aligning with authenticity, on a scale of more-or-less, as we move through the contexts of our lived experiences. In my case, the expectations to which I subscribed in my earlier life kept me, not entirely *inauthentic*, but rather in a less authentic state resulting in a dissonance and anxiety that could not be named.

While queer theory rejects essentialist ideas and the concept of a stable, authentic self, it has nevertheless been helpful in disrupting the rigidity common of positivist psychological views (Minton, 1997) around sexual identity. Both social constructionist psychological understanding and

queer theory's views present identity as something that is constructed within sociopolitical arrangements, but it is queer theory that proposes the potential for change at any time in one's life (Bernal Crespo, 2022). Given that identity represents a connection between self and society, it is beneficial to use queer theory to understand the broad, cultural and political influences of sexuality while also honouring the individual experience through psychological consideration.

Using critical autoethnography to explore this topic was a valuable way to access a first-person experience that may not be well represented in other forms of research on coming out. The limitation of autoethnography is that it is not necessarily generalizable to the population—a factor it readily accepts in exchange for an unbounded subjective window into a personal experience (Poulos, 2021). Although this study might not translate to the experience of a majority, it does provide evidence to support a review of long-standing psychological theories of identity development, like Erikson's (1959) psychosocial theory of development and Cass' (1984) model of Homosexual Identity Formation, to question the sequential, hierarchical, or linear aspects of their design. Through understanding a subjective experience involving a deconstruction of established conventional beliefs, to a recognition of incongruence between internal experience and outward presentation, and a reconstruction of identity and self-image in line with positive social connection and updated values, one can see how variations of this experience might be relevant to other women who face questions of sexuality in middle life. Furthermore, through analyzing these narratives, one can understand the nuances of claiming a sexual identity and see coming out as a unique process of internal and external experience that should be honoured in its totality, rather than acknowledged as a goal driven point of achievement (Rust, 1993).

Acknowledging the limitation of autoethnography, future research could expand to include narratives of other women who have come out in middle life and address the questions that remain from this study. Primarily, it would be beneficial to ask how compulsory heterosexuality has shown up in the experiences of others and whether this influence was deconstructed in the coming out process. Additionally, the small amount of research on the concept of *coming in* (Rosenberg, 2018) can be enhanced by asking other women about their intrapsychic and reflective period of sexuality recognition. With respect to an explicit act of coming out and disclosing non-heterosexuality to others, it would be interesting to learn about whether women in middle life feel connected to queer culture and community or how they might navigate “being late to the party” or not being “gay enough”. Finally, there is value in discussing the role of ambiguous grief in the coming out process, especially when this unfolds in middle life. Not only is grief experienced with the relinquishing of heterosexual privilege, but a sense of loss might also be felt with the uncertainty or regret of a past Self (Thacker Darrow et al., 2022). The acknowledgment of grief may seem to conflict with a strengths-based view of queer existence, but it has arisen in this study as an honoured and important aspect of achieving self-fulfilment and therefore should not be avoided as a taboo topic in future qualitative research.

It has been a powerful experience to hold the positions of both subject and researcher throughout this study. There is a therapeutic element to autoethnography that makes meaning of experience and adds value to subjective knowledge by reflecting personal stories through a critical lens. As highlighted by Joy and Davies (2024), storytelling offers a unique contribution to scholarship by creating space for intersectional identities that may otherwise remain invisible in research. Furthermore, holding different—often contradictory—ways of knowing, through psychology and queer theory, has been a tenuous tool for advancing my understanding of research

and transforming beliefs about my life. Mostly, this study has changed the ways in which I view coming out, by placing less emphasis on finding a moment on a timeline and extending grace to a lifelong process that includes an internal time of coming in and extends to an ever evolving need to disclose my identity, as required by future contexts. Importantly, this also includes a new compassion for the person I was before the awareness of the conditioning influences on the recognition of my sexuality—the sources of inauthenticity that kept me from myself. Finally, learning to “queer” the literature has made me a better consumer of research, a critical participant in society, and more compassionate member of my community.

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