

a closet full of shame



MA Thesis Gender Studies

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Keep kissing boys in the street

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that the gay closet is a shaping feature in the lives of many homosexual people and, most importantly, I argue that it is a place full of shame. This place only draws meaning in a heteronormative society in which the labels feminine and masculine define who we are. Being witnessed in our failure to live up to these social gender conventions, we hide in this place full of shame and play the ideal self. By relying on my own experience, and by using contemporary art examples, I have explored the world of 'feeling bad' and stressed the fact that shame plays an important role in remaining the homosexual-heterosexual and the private-public binary. Finally, I underlined that shame is not necessarily only negative, and that it possesses potential, as in shame we truss ourselves more firmly to ourselves. If one is able to go through the effortful process of coming-out, one might end up with a more authentic and prideful life.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Mom?’

The sun is sending out her warmest colors. The sky is at its bluest. It has been one of the best days of this summer. The weather proves infectious; inside the house everyone is smiling and cheerful. Everyone must know how the sun can brighten people’s day. Well, today is such a day. The sun does everyone a favor. Except me.

‘Dad?’

Even the warmest and yellowest sun would not be able to cheer me up. I am actually very cold and I want this to be done, but I don’t know how so I just sit here and stare at the sun which symbolizes the perfect opposite of how I feel inside.

‘Can you....’

Fuck. Two hands squeeze together around my throat and I’m nearly able to talk.

‘Can you please sit down? I have to tell you something.

I’m not going to use that word. I just can’t. I’m not going to use a word that all the people around me abuse, laugh at and use to degrade other people and their behavior. I’m not going to use a word I’ve been called a dozen times, by people who think they have the power over me just because I do not fit into their standards. I fucking hate that word. I hate how it is possible that other people abuse the word for the sexuality I identify with so that I am myself afraid to use it. I also hate the silence at this moment and the looks in the eyes of my parents which reveal that they are *so* not ready for what I am going to tell them.

‘I like boys more than girls.’

....

To be homosexual in the 21st century is to be aware of the fact that you live with stigma. Despite the fact that since the seventies there exists an ongoing movement of gay-

emancipation and although today's gay men enjoy hard-won social acceptance, you'll still be the butt of jokes, the subject of political discussions and maybe even the reason for your parent's shame. Four years ago, I came to realize that I could not live with my secret any longer, and I came out gay to the people around me. In the preceding example, in which I describe my own coming-out to my parents, it becomes clear that shame has controlled and restricted my (closeted) life throughout the years. It shows how language can be inherently shameful, which is demonstrated before by Judith Butler in her book *Bodies That Matter* (1993): "The term 'queer' [which is in my case the word 'gay'] has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation" (26). Besides this link between shame and linguistics, the example shows how my fear for the opinion of others controlled my life in this period. My own process of coming-out has been very significant for the life I live now, and although I consider these processes to be outdated, I have noticed that it is still very necessary. The puzzlement about this necessity is at the heart of this thesis, in which I researched why the closet exists for people with non-normative sexual/gender identities, and what the role of shame and authenticity is in this process. My argument will be that the closet is a bitter, uncomfortable, depressing and most importantly, a shameful place through which homosexual subjects can achieve authenticity and pride.¹

As Dennis Altman argues in his book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971): "the majority of those who identify as homosexual fear disclosure" (49). In this thesis, however, my point will not be that there are heterosexual boys and that there are homosexual boys and that the latter are marginalized. Rather, I want to show how shame plays a role in maintaining the homo-/heterosexual binary, and how socialized and normative ideas of sexuality and gender continue to maintain the existence of the metaphorical construction of the closet. To reach this goal, I will first explain what this place of 'the closet' and being 'in' or 'out' implies. Eve Sedgwick, in her seminal book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), argues that the homo-/heterosexual divide is a central

¹ I have some personal problems with the use of the word 'homosexual', which is in my eyes a stigmatizing term which is often used for the wrong reasons. This is why I considered using the term 'queer', as it is in general used in a more positive and inclusive discourse. However, this led to many more problems of naming, which means I decided to stick to the term 'homosexual'.

controlling factor in all modern Western identities. Besides, she explains that the closet is a defining and controlling concept for every homosexual; being 'in the closet' means that we experience our sexuality privately and secretly. When one is 'out of the closet', this means that one has been through the process of making their (homo-/bisexual) desires public where heterosexual desires were expected. This proves that, regarding sexuality, coming-out is only a significant process for non-heterosexual subjects, as heterosexuals live up to society's expectations.² Sedgwick adds that coming-out is meaningful because being homosexual in itself is not considered 'a problem', as long as it is lived privately (although people might sometimes be accused of not having disclosed enough about their homosexuality). Being publicly homosexual (being 'out') however provides enough ground for homophobic practices and gay oppression, which makes coming-out a vulnerable act. Sedgwick says: "the space for simply existing as a gay person [...] is in fact bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden" (ibid; 70).

This thesis will consist of three chapters. In Chapter One, I will give a definition of shame and link it to homosexuality. By using the definition of shame that Sara Ahmed gives in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), and by analyzing David Lester's text *The Role of Shame in Suicide* (1997), I will answer the question why/how we feel ashamed and why it matters. To make the connection with homosexuality, I will use the book *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man's World* (2005), written by Alan Downs. In this book, Downs describes the stages of a gay man's journey out of shame, drawing on the effects of many recent social, cultural and political changes. An analysis of these three texts, combined with my own experience with coming-out as a gay man, will explain how and why the closet is the ultimate place to hide parts of your identity which are considered to be deviant, and, at the same time, that it is the place in which we can experience shame to the fullest.

² However, there are many other narratives in which coming-out is significant, also for people who identify as heterosexual. In The Netherlands, for example, there is a national campaign against stigma around HIV called "*HIV uit de kast*" (HIV out of the closet), in which people are encouraged to 'come out' with their HIV. (<https://www.hivuitdekast.nl/>) Other narratives in which the coming-out discourse can play a role are, among others: religion, politics, fetishes and addictions.

In Chapter Two, I will explore the world of toxic masculinities. By using the book *Masculinities* (1993) of Raewyn Connell, I will explain what they imply, how they affect homosexual (closeted) subjects, and, more specifically, how they affected me as a closeted young boy. Also, by using the essay of Chimamanda N. Adichie, in which she argues that we should all be feminists, I will explain what the role of feminism is in breaking with these toxic and socialized gender conventions. However, to show that not only feminism breaks with gender stereotypes, I will also analyze the art-projects of two homosexual photographers who question and explore the world of men and masculinities. The first project is called *Tryouts* by Ryjam James Caruther, the second is *Boys* by Tyler Udall. These series of portraits will reveal what words are unable to explain, as they portray men in their most vulnerable moments. In the last part of this chapter, I will explore how our limited and restricted idea of masculinity can imply homophobia, using the text of Micheal S. Kimmel: *Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the construction of Gender Identity* (1994).

In the third and last chapter of this thesis, I will demonstrate how, after all, authenticity and pride can be achieved through shame. Firstly, by using the book *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (2007), written by Sally Munt, I will explain that shame has potential, especially for people who don't fit into gender/sexual norms. After, by using a more philosophical approach, I will elaborate on what it means to be 'prideful' and how the process of coming-out can give meaning, purpose and satisfaction to the life of homosexual subjects. For this purpose, the texts *Prideful* (2001) of the Icelandic philosopher Kristjánsson and the text *The Subtlety of Emotion* (2000) of Aaron Ben-Ze'ev will be used. In the last two parts of this chapter, I will focus on two examples of homosexual subjects who have been able to achieve pride and authenticity. The first example is from poet Danice Froham, who wrote the poem *Dear Straight People* (2003) in which she explains her route to authenticity, and in which the importance of gay authenticity becomes clear. The second example will be my own. In this whole thesis, but especially in this last small piece of text, the description of my own journey from shame to pride will function as the ultimate proof of my argument; the fact that the closet is a depressing and shameful place for homosexuals, but that it can work as a catalysator for achieving pride and an authentic (gay) identity.

1.1 Method

To build up and structure my argument, I have used autoethnography as research method. In her text on qualitative research, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson explains that: “autoethnography is a research approach which draws upon the researcher’s own personal lived experience, specifically in relation to the culture (and subcultures) of which s/he is a member” (2012; 193). This means that I have been blurring the researcher/researched distinction, and that I used my own lived experience as a white, homosexual adolescent, growing up in a middle-class family in the east of The Netherlands. I used this experience to illustrate my cultural experience with the closet and to support the argument that, for homosexuals, the closet is a shameful and uncomfortable place. I am convinced that the personal can be political and that the specific can be universal, which explains my choice for this approach. This conviction follows from the changes in feminist politics during the women's movement from the 1960s and the 1970s, when women articulated a new gendered politics. As Caitlin Cahil explains, in her text with the telling title *The Personal is Political* (2007): “Through a process of investigating their own everyday lives and collective reflection, research participants [in the seventies] identify their individual experiences as shared, as social, and then in turn as political” (268). After a year of talking, investigating and researching gender, sexuality and ethnicity, I am aware of the fact that individual experiences are *indeed* shared, social and therefore political. Besides, the choice to use autoethnography as one of the main methods also entails that, in this research, my focus lies on male homosexual subjects. However, some aspects of living with the closet might be universal and therefore significant for other lived experiences too.

As Allen-Collinson explains, autoethnography consists of three components: the auto (the self), the ethno (the nation/race) and the graphy (the writing). Firstly, this means that this thesis is part of a Western discourse, as “every ethos [...] has its own sets of meaning, structures and normative orders” (2012; 195). I am aware of the fact that I live in a country in which certain narratives around homosexuality are dominant, and that this has consequences to my life as a gay person. My autoethnography will therefore echo this narrative and place itself in the center of it. Secondly, I am convinced that the *graphy*, the writing-process of this thesis, has in itself been a form of research; during the process, I have not only been aware of the national and political sets of norms (*ethos*); I have also

re-examined what they are. As Allen-Collinson states: “writing is also a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis” (ibid; 194). This is how bringing myself in is not only personal but also cultural and political: it explores and re-thinks our Western political and cultural values and it brings them into practice.

This personal process of bringing myself in, as Allen-Collinson already explains, is “a challenging, intellectually demanding and emotionally painful voyage of self-investigation” (ibid), and despite the fact that I was convinced that I wanted to tell my story, the writing-process of this thesis has been a vulnerable journey. It took me to places I have not been visiting for a while and it has led to some emotional discussions with beloved ones. It has been my goal to convert this personal confrontation into a confrontation for you, my reader. The function of the personal quotes and stories which haunt this thesis is to give insight in the thoughts of a closeted homosexual subject and to let you join me on this emotional voyage.³

This story is however not only a personal story; throughout this thesis I have engaged with contemporary academic literature on shame, masculinities and the closet, and putted them in dialogue with my own lived experience. In this literature review I analyzed what has been written in different areas of science, and I have been provided with new insights. As Jane Webster writes in her paper *Analyzing the Past to Prepare For the Future: Writing a Literature Review* (2002):

A review of prior, relevant literature is an essential feature of any academic project. An effective review creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge. It facilitates theory development, closes areas where a plethora of research exists, and uncovers areas where research is needed. (8)

The combination of autoethnography and this literature review means that this thesis is a combination of the personal, the political, the cultural and the analytical; these four aspects will function as the leitmotiv through the text you are about to read.

³ Although I consider this story ‘my’ story, and although I am the only author of the texts, it is also other people’s story and I am aware that the people around me are also, in various ways, the authors of it. Without their approval, I would have never been able to write this thesis.

WE HIDE IN SHAME

I'm gay and I wonder how it feels to kiss someone in public without being seen as someone who makes a political statement. Without being cheered at or without being told that it's *very brave*.

I wonder how it feels to take authenticity for granted.

I wonder what the privilege of not being looked at when holding hands with the one you love feels like.

I wonder how it feels to walk into a club sober without being super self-conscious.

Yes. I'm gay, but I wonder what it feels like to identify my sexuality with a word that is not used as a curse, or that is not used by people to make fun of others. In fifth grade, when I realized I was not straight, I came home from school telling myself I had to write down "I'm gay". I couldn't, because once out there it would be the truth.

I'm still afraid to hold hands in public too, because I feel like other people may feel offended by it. But also because I'm not like the them: at that moment, something inside me wants to be like them with all that I am. Of course, I realized that that won't ever be possible. However, sometimes I'm still wondering: what would it feel like to be able to show people on the streets your affection for someone?

I can only speculate on what the answer will be...

2.1 Introduction

Shame; noun \ˈshām\: (a) a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety (b) the susceptibility to such emotion · have you no shame? (definition of Merriam Webster Dictionary)

Shame is painful. Shame makes one susceptible and it underlines ones' shortcomings. In the introducing text, I showed how shame caused painful feelings in my own life, and how society has/had the power to emphasize my 'shortcomings'. In this chapter, I will focus on more academic definitions of shame. I will write specifically on the context of shame in the lives of male homosexual subjects – and even more specifically; on my own. Theorists

as Sara Ahmed, David Lester and Alan Downs all have worked on theories in which they link the affective feeling of shame to homosexuality. After conducting an analysis of the texts *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) by Sara Ahmed and *The Role of Shame in Suicide* (1997) by David Lester, I will focus on hiding in the closet as a consequence of shame. The closet is the place in which we already like to hide when we're really young and playing hide and seek. However, metaphorically, it is also seen as the ultimate place in which a person can hide and deny (parts of) their true-self. Downs explains: "so the little [gay] boy becomes the man who is driven to avoid shame by hiding his dark truth" (2005; 16). Downs shows that one is not ashamed because one is 'not out' or in the closet, but that the closet exists *because of* affective feelings as shame. However, I will end the chapter by explaining how a gay identity is not only shameful for the gay subject itself but that it can also be shameful for the people who are close to him, especially family members (using the book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, written by Dennis Altman in 1971).

2.2 Witnessed shame

In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed explains that emotions are cultural practices and she explores how they shape the bodies of both individuals and collectives. For example, she asks herself the question: "what does it mean to claim an identity through shame?", a question she tries to answer by "think[ing] about what shame does to the bodies whose surfaces burn with the apparent immediacy of its affect" (103). Ahmed describes shame as an intense and bodily feeling of the subject being against itself. She states it is a painful sensation that is felt by and on the body; a sensation which is experienced when another witnesses something that we have done wrong or that is bad. This feeling of personal failure is often experienced in front of another, which implies that we feel ashamed by the other's gaze: "an ashamed person can hardly endure to meet the gaze of those present" (ibid). Ahmed argues that we can take on the gaze of the other in relation to ourselves. "I see myself as if I were this other" (ibid). The bad action – the failure – is therefore not only a failure in the eyes of others, it is profoundly a failure of ourselves to ourselves. David Lester, in his text on shame in relation to depression and suicide argues, in line with Ahmed, that shame is the feeling we experience when we evaluate our actions or feelings and conclude that we have done wrong (Lester 1992; 352). Ahmed would argue that this evaluation is done through the eyes of the other. Sociologist Helen M. Lynd adds to this that this does not mean that others *have to* be

involved, as the exposure will always be an exposure to one's own eyes (1958; 28). This confirms Ahmed's idea that the disappointment to ourselves is already a potential cause for shame.

I would like to take this idea of witnessed shame and apply it to (shameful) same-sex desires. Homosexuals in the closet do not only feel shame because of an action which is inherently bad; we can also be ashamed of what we *are*: "shame becomes a matter of being – of the relation of self to itself – insofar as shame is about appearance, about how the subject appears before and to others" (Ahmed 2004; 105). We can take on 'badness' as something that is ours. This is how our same-sex desires can function as the 'source' of shame, as they are considered different and bad by others. This is why we feel are ashamed, but this is also how we are inherently shameful: shame takes us over and controls us. Ahmed argues that shame is an affective feeling that cannot be detached from the self, and that it is therefore something "bound up with self-recognition" (ibid). This means that the relation of self to itself is at stake, and that we want ourselves to be something different than we are.

I'm worth more than that.

I have explained how shame requires witness and that shame is a sensation we feel when another evaluates our behavior to be bad. On top of that, Ahmed argues that, when we are ashamed, this bad feeling is also *transferred* by the other, which means that the witness of the action also evaluates and judges: "In shame, more than my action is at stake: the badness of an action is transferred to me, such that I feel myself to be bad and to have been 'found' or 'found out' as bad by others" (Ahmed 2004; 105). This is how, among many others, gay identities become shameful. Ahmed explains: "some identities become stigmatized or shaming within the social order, so that the subject in assuming such identities becomes committed to a life that is read by others as shameful" (ibid; 107). This means that we take on identities that are inherently shameful. The following text will include examples of how the 'badness' that lies within homosexuality was transferred to me, even before I revealed my homosexuality to the people around me. Also, it shows once again how 'the other' had the power to influence my self-image in a negative way, how shame is about appearance and how we can 'take on' badness.

Faggot.

I will never get rid of this name you gave me, when you stood in front of me in the bar and you didn't let me pay because "faggots should do 'their thing' in gay bars only".

I felt a faggot when you told me that your son will never be gay because you'll educate him well. I wanted to convince myself that you were the one who is crazy, but the voice in my head told me something else.

You putted this stamp on my face when you threw two glasses of beer in my eyes just because I was kissing the one that I liked, and because this is how my heart works.

You labelled me when you told me that gay men and woman are 'just another type of person' – not knowing you were talking about the person who had been one of your best friends since kindergarten.

You made me feel like a faggot when you told me that after my coming out I became 'way more gay', not knowing how you destroyed my pride as I was finally myself. Not knowing how you shattered my happiness as I finally got rid of the only but most difficult acting role I have ever played in my life. I was an actor beyond compare; everyone fell for it – even though there have been moments during which I forgot the laws of acting. Even though they were rare, I hated myself for these moments as for you, they were the reason to wipe the floor with me and to push me further back into this dark and bitter place.

The place in which I realized over and over again that not only people *think* I am a faggot, but that I *am* one. The place I wanted to escape but just didn't know how. The place overwhelmed by shame.

2.3 Living up to social norms

As we have seen, shame requires witness. However, the bad feeling (or disgust) is attributed to the self: we feel ourselves to be bad. We fail in the eyes of the other and take on the bad feeling. This 'other', as I will explain here, is an 'ideal other'. The existence of social norms is an important source of shame – not to say *the* source of shame. (Ahmed 2004; 106). In this paragraph, I will explain how this works. First of all, as Judith Butler

explains; the world materializes (gender) norms through repetition. In her book *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler says that the construction of social norms "not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of [these] norms" (19). With other words; through repetition, norms become the only possible forms of social life. These norms are powerful because they teach us at a very young age what we can and cannot do. Or, in other words, what is good and what is bad (and therefore shameful). This creates a social ideal with which we are in constant battle. Shame is experienced when subjects are caught during their "moment of failure in living up to the social ideal" (Ahmed 2004; 106). This is in line with what Lester says, when he explains: "to feel shame one has to compare one's behavior against standards in which one has come to believe as a result of socialization" (Lester 1992; 352). When one is not living up to social norms of what is good and what is wrong, shame is brought into being. A confrontation with the others' gaze during this moment of failure intensifies the subject's feeling of 'apartness' which means being and feeling different than the norm: "apartness is felt in the moment of exposure to others, an exposure that is wounding" (Ahmed 2004; 105).

When we analyze the last piece of text in which I realize that I *am* a faggot, we can see that the idea of 'apartness' is indeed transferred by the other. Besides its abusive language, the idea of not fitting in seems to me the reason why the sentence 'you became way more gay' feels very humiliating and wounding; it underlines my 'apartness' and the fact of me not being part of the norm. This norm is clearly always communicated by the other: 'the other' told me that their son will never be gay thanks to good education, 'the other' condemned me by throwing beer in my eyes, 'the other' told me that the public space is only a place for people who fit the norm and that 'faggots should fuck off to gay-bars'. The ideal other is also why I feel ashamed when I hold hands with a man in public, as on the streets a straight couple is (still) the norm and the only sexual form to be shown. By holding hands with another man, my 'apartness' is exposed and it therefore intensifies the feeling of not fitting into the norm; especially when surrounded by men who *do* fit in. At that moment, having failed to approximate this ideal is why we feel ashamed.

2.4 The pseudo-self

When I kiss this girl, people will be satisfied for a while.

It may be clear that shame un-covers our true-self: it exposes parts of us which are/were covered – to ourselves or to the other. At the same time, shame is about covering. As Ahmed says: “the desire to take cover and to be covered presupposes the failure of cover; in shame, one desires cover precisely because one has already been exposed to others” (2004; 104). As we have seen, shame is the exposure of something bad – in this specific case same-sex desires are considered to be the ‘bad action’. In shame, the subject turns away from itself, wishing not to expose this badness. As Lester says: “We hide our face in shame, and our wish is not to be seen. ‘I wanted to fall through the floor’ ‘I wanted to die,’ and ‘I could have killed myself’ are common expressions of those who experience shame” (1992; 352). Because we feel ashamed of not conforming to the (national) ideals, we take on a role. The role of being the ideal subject. Ahmed explains that social norms and idealization create “the desire to be ‘like’ the other, as well as to be recognized by another” (2004; 106). Adam Downs elaborates on this idea. He says: “The consequence [of the avoidance of shame] is that his true self remains undeveloped and hidden deep within him. Who he is, what he really likes, his true passion, and more are all colored and buried beneath the façade he has developed to avoid shame” (2005; 29). This is how we create a pseudo-self; a self that does what others expect of him instead of doing what he really wants. Downs continues:

In large part, we played the part and took girls to the prom so that we’d fit in, all the while knowing it was a farce. Although we received validation for our actions, it was meaningless because we knew at the deepest level that we were play-acting. Consequently, we developed a pseudo-self, which wasn’t a natural growth of our abilities, desires, and intelligence. It was a self that would earn us validation by others, but our true selves remained hidden from everyone. (ibid; 25)

For homosexual subjects, this façade of the pseudo-self is necessary to not get depressed. We feel obliged to show that we are actually part of the group – however meaningless this is.⁴ Ahmed also refers to this idea, calling the façade the 'ideal self'. She states that this self is produced "as a self that belongs to a community" (2004; 106). These pseudo/ideal selves underline the power of the normative; we are rather something different than what we really are, just to be part of 'the group'. The small piece of text you are about to read are thoughts in which I let myself believe in, to remain my true self hidden from everyone, and to be part of the group of which I knew I actually did not fit in.

If I don't act gay, maybe I'm not.

If I dream about marrying a woman –

If I kiss with a different girl every weekend –

If I stop looking at boys –

If I stop daydreaming about ever kissing a boy –

If I tell other people about my 'future happy family' –

Maybe I'm not.

2.5 The protection of the closet

The closet is a place in which we are not seen. A place in which we can literally hide, and, as Sedgwick says: "closetedness itself is a performance initiated [...] by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (1990; 3). All these factors make 'the closet' an ideal place for playing the role of the ideal subject, and to remain silent about our true-self. As Mark Chekola, philosopher and expert in ethics and well-being, wrote: "'The closet' is an institution, a set of practices occurring within the context of a culturally or morally negative view about homosexuality, which has at least two functions. One is to provide a means of protection and survival; the other is to provide a means for hiding something about which one feels shame" (1994; 70). At the one hand,

⁴ Downs seems to refer to Dennis Altman, who wrote *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971), in which he explains that homosexuals force themselves into pseudo-heterosexual affairs, trying to convince themselves they are "at-least" bisexual, or even that their homosexuality is a stage they will grow out of.

we hide in the metaphorical and shameful place of the closet because we need protection and we want to survive in a heteronormative society. At the other, the closet is the ultimate place in which we can hide (parts of) our non-normative identity – it provides us with a place to cover our shame.

As queer theorist Eve K. Sedgwick says in her book *Epistemology of The Closet* (1990): “The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life: and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (68). This means that, in the lives of homosexual subjects, the closet is not a feature only for a certain period of their lives. However ‘out’ we may be, the closet will always shape and influence our behavior, as in many (new) contexts the question is always: ‘when should I tell?’ Sedgwick stresses the continuity and centrality of the closet in the lives of homosexuals: “the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” and “even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them” (ibid; 68, 71). This last quote underlines the fact that one is never ‘completely out’. Everywhere where heterosexuality is presumed, one is ought to come out at some point. Sedgwick says: “every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy and disclosure” (ibid; 68).

This last quote explains how the closet only draws meaning in heteronormative and heterosexist contexts. Adams argues: “the closet is not a function of homosexuality, but of compulsory heterosexuality⁵” (2010; 237). The fact that gay people ought to come out is the consequence of the invisibility of homosexuality, or, as Sedgwick would say, a

⁵ With compulsory heterosexuality Adams refers to the context of heterosexuality and opposite-sex desires being perceived as better than homosexuality and, also, the context which frames a person as straight until proven gay (which makes the act of coming out unnecessary for heterosexuals). I will elaborate on this notion in Chapter Two.

consequence of secrecy and disclosure, the private and the public, the homosexual and the heterosexual. (Sedgwick 1990; 71)

It was a secret I could not reveal. Not even to myself. I was not able to accept it, as I believed that life as I knew it would completely collapse the day I would announce I was gay. It was a curse I had to hide behind the curtain. Only when I was alone, most of the time at the end of the day, lying in bed, I would allow myself to have no limitations on what I could think or do. However, these moments were as meaningless as the façade itself, as it only emphasized that this was something I could not share with the world and as it convinced me that there would never come a day on which my thoughts would become universal.

I explained that same-sex desires can cause shame, as these desires are socialized to be bad. We have seen that homosexual identities are inherently shameful, and that the closet is the place in which we try to cope with this bad feeling and the power of socialized norms. This private and secret place of the closet works as a shame-avoiding mechanism: “the avoidance of shame becomes the single most powerful, driving force in his [a closeted gay men’s] life” (Downs 2005; 29). There are different ways in which one can cope with the feeling of shame. As I explained before, the straight-game is one, in which a queer subject tries to appear straight. This game is played “in the hope of bringing relief from the suffocating shame that overwhelms us” (ibid; 64). Another way in which one can try to avoid the label of being gay is, as Pascoe writes; “to turn another boy into a fag. In this way, the fag-identity [becomes] a hot potato that no boy [wants] to be left holding” (2005; 60). This way, the gay identity becomes shamed onto bodies by the gaze of the other. By turning someone else into ‘a fag’, we can for a moment escape from the possibility that other people will read us as homosexual – which is a worst-case scenario. This is how boys learn long before adolescence that the gay-identity is to be avoided,⁶ and this is also how

⁶ Around me, it happens so often that straight people are called out ‘gay’ because of doing something ‘what a fag would do’. In volleyball, the sport I have been playing my whole life, men even call the tactical, softer attack the ‘gay-ball’ and people will joke that the player who scored by such an attack will receive ‘the pink card’. Also, it is so common that, especially men, have the feeling that they should declare themselves straight before they express that they find a person of the same sex physically attractive. These are, two of the many, examples of how in every-day life the ‘fag identity’ is to be avoided and a clearly shamed identity.

the gay identity becomes even more shameful. As Pascoe writes: “Becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with a sexual identity” (2011; 54). This identity, as Pascoe argues further, is fluid enough that most boys police their behavior out of fear of getting the fag identity imposed on them, but at the same time it is definite enough so that it is recognizable and that boys can strive to avoid it. I will explore the role of toxic masculinities and the danger of how we raise boys further in Chapter Two, but it may be clear that this is how boys, at a young age, are shamed because of their non-normative behavior, and that in this way the gay-identity is passed on from the one to the other.

2.6 Shaming the family

Mark Chekola, in his text *Outing, Truth-Telling, and the Shame of the Closet* (1994) recognizes that coming out to family is, for many, an especially significant step. Altman, in his book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971), agrees by saying: “most gay people feel caught in an insoluble dilemma: if we disclose our homosexuality to our parents, we will risk anger and pain; yet if we hide it, we must drift apart, avoiding any contact that might uncover our essential selves” (48). We fear pain and disappointment of our parents, but at the same time we are in constant search for their validity. As we cannot change ourselves, this dilemma is why we play the ideal self in front of our family until the moment we find out that it is no longer possible. Also, this dilemma shows that not only society as a whole is heteronormative, but families are too. Waldner argues “the family represents a basis structural and relational arrangement which serves as a primary socialization agent by supporting heterosexual norms and values” (1999; 86). This means that, by expressing same-sex desires to parents and other family-members, one’s ‘failure’ is exposed and witnessed which causes shame. Furthermore, Ahmed argues that, in case of witness, not only homosexual subjects are shamed but the family is too. She writes: “[q]ueer desires become an injury to the family, and to the bodily form of the social norm” (2004; 107).

In this last part of the chapter, I will use my own experience of coming-out to my parents as an example of how this step is indeed significant and difficult. This does not mean that I am making universal claims; I recognize that everyone’s coming-out (to their family) is different and that mine is only one example out of millions. However, I am convinced that

my specific case can be of importance when we talk about coming-out to your family through shame, as it will underline the difficulties and the feelings of shame it can impose on one's family. In the introduction, we have seen that coming out to my parents has not been not easy. I asked myself constantly if, when and how I should tell them about my sexuality. Once the moment was there and I spoke the words "I like boys more than girls" my father could just tell me that he was disappointed, before he stood up and went to another room. The moment my father stood up to leave the conversation, my world collapsed – my father would later tell me that his world collapsed too, as I would fall short of 'all his expectations'. This means that my worries were legitimate; I have never felt such a failure.

After I came out to my parents, my father wanted to tell his siblings in order to make sure they would not get 'the news' from others. The day before he went to see them, he told me that 'he had to go and see all his brothers (5) and his sister to tell them that I was gay and that I had to realize that this was something he was not happy with.' Although it was his own decision to do it this way, he was clearly anxious to let the people who are important to him *witness* my same-sex desires. As a result, not only his day was full of anxiety and nervousness; mine was too. To let my dad know I was thinking about him, I sent him a message saying that I love him unconditionally. At the end of the evening, I received the following message from my aunt:

Hi Sander. As you know, your father was here tonight, as he wanted to tell his brothers and sister himself. He was struggling a lot. When your message came in, he started crying, but we tried to cheer him up. We think it's very brave that you told your mom and dad. One day, they'll both realize that this is what makes you happy. I, myself, hope that you will find happiness too, as happiness is what counts. It doesn't matter if this is with a boy or a girl. [...]

This example of how my father was struggling with the fact that I was gay and how he dealt with it emotionally underlines the fact that homosexual subjects can bring shame 'onto' the family; my personal shame all of a sudden became my father's shame and my struggle became my father's struggle. Besides, my dilemma became his dilemma: he later explained that he feared anger and denial by his siblings, which is why he did not know how and when to tell them the story. Ahmed says: "shame both confirms and negates the

love that sticks us together” (2004; 107). I think this particular evening, and the quote “please realize I’m not happy with it” are the perfect examples of how shame can negate love. At the same time, the present relationship with my father is the perfect example of how it can also confirm love and how ‘being ashamed’ can keep people together. I will elaborate more on this idea, and on how we can convert feelings of shame into pride in Chapter Three of this thesis.

TOXIC MASCULINITIES

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will advance the idea that every man is born with an essential quality of 'masculinity' – a quality that every man should feel compelled to manifest in the world. Michael Kimmel, in his text *Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity* (1994) argues: "We think of manhood as eternal, a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man. We think of manhood as a thing, a quality that one either has or doesn't have. [...] We think of manhood as a transcendent tangible property that each man must manifest in the world" (213). I would like to argue that this essential notion of masculinity includes normative concepts, of which compulsory heterosexuality is perhaps the most important one. Failing to be heterosexual would therefore mean failing to be 'a man'. Not being able to live up to the idea what it is like to be a man can cause a sense of personal failure, which can lead to shame. Kimmel argues that, as men, we are afraid to not measure up. We are afraid that we are not real men. This fear leads to shame: "we are ashamed to be afraid" (ibid; 214). To discuss masculinity and manhood, I will begin this chapter with a brief explanation of Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity. After, I will elaborate on the idea of toxic masculinities and its relation to homophobia, which means that I will explain how the narrow definition of masculinity can work restrictive for male subjects in general – and (closeted) male homosexual subjects in particular. I will show how ideologies of manhood can control and dominate our lives, and how they dominated my own life as closeted young boy.

3.2 Gender performativity

In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler calls into question gender categories and their universality. Butler refuses to see gender as a stable identity or a given entity from which certain acts proceed. In making the distinction between sex and gender, she argues that it "does not follow that the construction of *men* will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that *woman* will interpret only female bodies" (10). This means that someone's gender is not prior to someone's acts. On the contrary, Butler argues that gender is constituted. This means that the way someone acts is not the consequence of their gender, but a consequence of the social construction and expectations that come from outside the

body. As she notes in her text *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988): “one does one’s body” (521), which means that one acts to cultural, but, maybe even more important, heteronormative standards: “the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between *feminine* and *masculine*, where these are understood as expressive attributes of *male* and *female*” (Butler 1990; 23). To say that gender is performative means that there are certain kinds of acts that produce certain effects. These acts are usually interpreted as dominantly masculine or dominantly feminine⁷, which means that they can either conform to an expected gender identity (and reproduce the category of gender) or contest that expectation.

3.3 Masculinity vs. femininity

You should wear dark colors. Talk about football. Play football. Watch it. At least care about it. Talk about money – how important it is to have as much as you can. Drink beer, also if you prefer wine. Stop talking about books. Or song lyrics. Or how you feel. Stop dancing – your place is at the bar. Try not to cry. But if you do, don’t do it on front of people. You better hide all your emotions. Work. Work a lot and work hard. Your insecurities do not exist. Neither do your vulnerabilities. Be rational. Make jokes about sex. Or women. Or fags. Make money: you are what you earn. Listen to rock music – or anything that is harder. Gamble. Have barbeques. Eat beef. Or chicken. Lots of chicken. Hate vegetables. Do not tell your friends you love them. Don’t tell anyone you love them. Ride a car and ride it as fast as you can. Be confident. Lower your voice. Do not talk too much. Take courage. *Man up*.

Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick agrees with Butler, expressing that people believe in the “illusion that there exists a *secure* version of masculinity (known, presumably, by the coolness of its homophobic enforcement) and a stable, intelligible way for men to feel about other men in modern heterosexual capitalist patriarchy” (1990; 84). This illusion

⁷ I use the definitions ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ as static terms, although I do not believe in them as being stable and I am aware of the fact that these terms only work with stereotypes and that they only obtain their meaning in a society which presumes a gender-binary. However, to avoid a thesis full of quotations marks, I will use them in this conventionally and socially accepted context.

creates stereotypes of which I only mentioned a few in the text above. Before elaborating on the homophobic element of this narrow definition of masculinity, I would like to state that the terms masculine and feminine not only point to the ways male and female sex subjects differ, but also to the ways men differ among themselves, as women differ among themselves – in matter of gender. A man can be labelled as feminine, whereas a woman can get the label masculine. Connell argues that, in our patriarchal and heteronormative system, these labels define one's personality: "In its modern usage, the term [masculine] assumes that one's behavior results from the type of person one is. That is to say, an unmasculine person would behave differently: being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth" (2005; 67). This idea is in line with Butler, who stated that some acts can confirm or contest an expectation based on someone's gender. Concerning masculinity, these actions may include ideas such as: men should be successful; men should restrict their emotions; men should restrict their affectionate behavior with other men; and men should be work/career driven. (Sanchez et al. 2009; 74)

These (generalized) social conventions on what it means to be masculine work as a regulatory mechanism. Chimamanda N. Adichie, in her book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), explains how feminism can apply to the lives of men, and how our idea of masculinity rules the bodies of (young) boys:

We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a *very* narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be [...] a *hard man*. (26)

In part, this idea of being a *hard man* and the irrational fear of coming across as feminine arise from the "masculinity-over-femininity" ideal. (Downs 2005; 68) Patriarchy teaches that femininity is 'weak' and 'emotionally instable' whereas masculinity is seen as 'strong' and 'rational'. (Connell 2005; 164) This is how, at a young age already, men are taught what they can and cannot be. They learn that the female identity is to be avoided; every association with femininity can unmask our insecurities or reveal our soft-side. "As young men we are constantly riding those gender boundaries, checking for fences we have constructed on the perimeter, making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might

show through” (Kimmel 1994; 215). For male homosexuals, these associations with femininity can reveal *who we really are*; they will reject our very gender and therefore, as an immediate consequence, it will also question our heterosexuality.

3.4 Captured masculinities

To elaborate on the impact that the *illusion* of masculinity has on male homosexual subjects, and to see how this is translated into art, I will give a short analysis of two art projects. The first one is called, *Tryouts*, a project of the young, queer photographer Ryan James Caruther. He has created a series of self-portraits in which he “explores the adolescent ritual of auditioning for a sports team from his perspective as a closeted gay man still growing comfortable in his skin” (Frank 2016a). In his performative pieces, Caruther plays with the idea of manhood. I have argued that masculinity is a construct/illusion which favors certain performances above others. Caruther explains that, when he was in High School, competing in sports was one of those performances which would conform one’s masculinity (and therefore, indirectly, one’s heterosexuality). However, he was not at all interested in doing sports. He says: “Growing up in a suburban New Jersey town, males my age were always preoccupied with sport [...] I had a constant disconnect from traditional forms of masculinity, as my interests were in other areas” (ibid). The fact that Caruther did not play sports questioned his masculinity and therefore his heterosexuality. The following four photos of the series illustrate Caruther’s disconnection from manhood, and his exclusion from the dominating discourse.

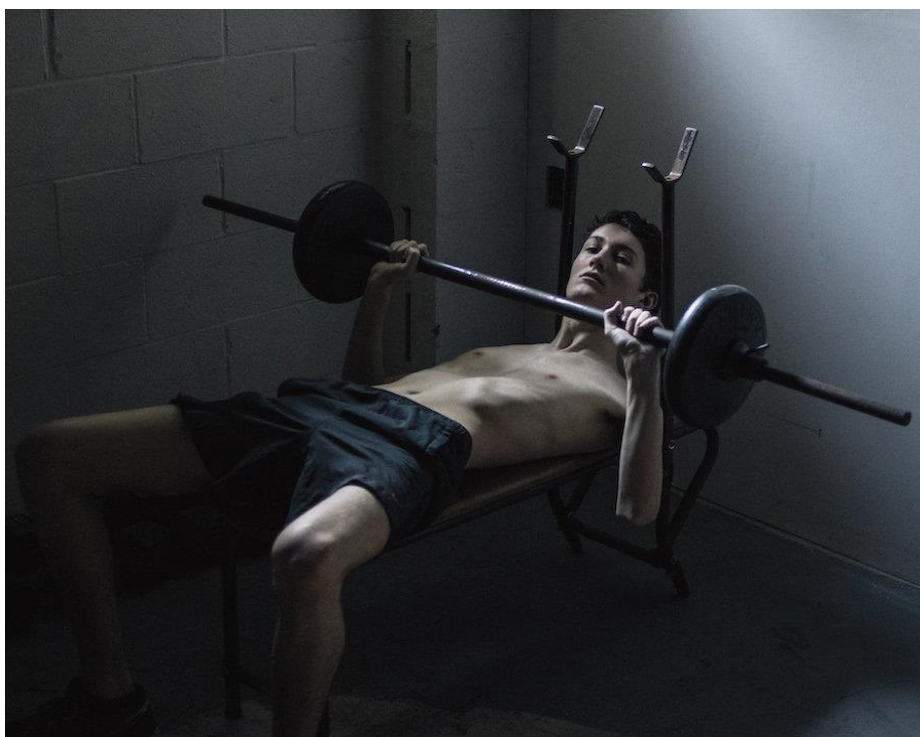


Image 1

(<http://ryanjamescaruthers.com/>)



Image 2

(<http://ryanjamescaruthers.com/>)



Image 3

(<http://ryanjamescaruthers.com/>)



Image 4

(<http://ryanjamescaruthers.com/>)

When we take a closer look at the pictures, we see Caruther being alienated from the 'traditional forms of masculinity'; he is not at all the strong, rational and powerful sports player we expect to see in sports pictures. In this way, the artist plays with stereotypes around manhood, and shows that these are not at all universal. He uses the sports fields as the cage in which we put young boys to be make them afraid of fear and vulnerability, and in that way, paradoxically, he displays his own vulnerability's. Not being able to avoid the situation which evokes shame (the gym class where other boys make fun of him), his vulnerabilities become exposed. In the second photograph, the role of shame seems very explicit. Caruther makes himself as small as possible. He hides himself from the public and puts his face down. In this way, he becomes the embodiment of his own wish to disappear, as in shame "bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame" (Ahmed 2004; 103).

The looks on his face reveal that the pressure of playing sports clearly makes Caruther feel alienated of what is expected from him, but at the same time, it alienates the spectator. As Caruther never really blends in the environments and departs from the norm, our expectations clash with reality – our expectations of 'a real sportsman' are not fulfilled. "He is at times too awkward or too lethargic, too graceful, sensual or delicate" (Frank

2016a). From this photo-series, we therefore learn once again that social (gender) interactions shape who we are and it teaches us how we are formed by the feeling of estrangement of gender expectations. Critic Priscilla Frank writes: “[w]hile it’s all too easy to willingly forget the traumatic adolescent memories that shape our adult selves, Caruthers peels back the scabs of his youth, inserting himself into the narrative he felt excluded from”, to which Caruthers adds: “I am sure my story is similar to those of many others” (ibid).

Another photo-series which is in dialogue with normative masculinities is *Boys*, by photographer Tyler Udall. The series “portrays a different, more complex, image of boyhood — one filled not only with blunt strength, power and machismo, but also tenderness, tranquility and sympathy” (Frank 2016b). The (queer) subjects in the pictures pose in various states of undress, poses in which they expose their vulnerable and emotional sides. The idea of the series is to engage with the idea that males are supposed to hide these parts of their identity by, on the contrary, emphasizing them. Udall says: “Males (especially gay males) are ostracized for demonstrating ‘feminine’ qualities: creativity, sensitivity and empathy [...] The fact of the matter is, men who exhibit these traits are sometimes met with ridicule, shame and are considered weak” (ibid). To get an impression of what the photo’s look like, I chose again to give four examples.



Image 4

(<http://tylerudall.com/>)



Image 5

(<http://tylerudall.com/>)

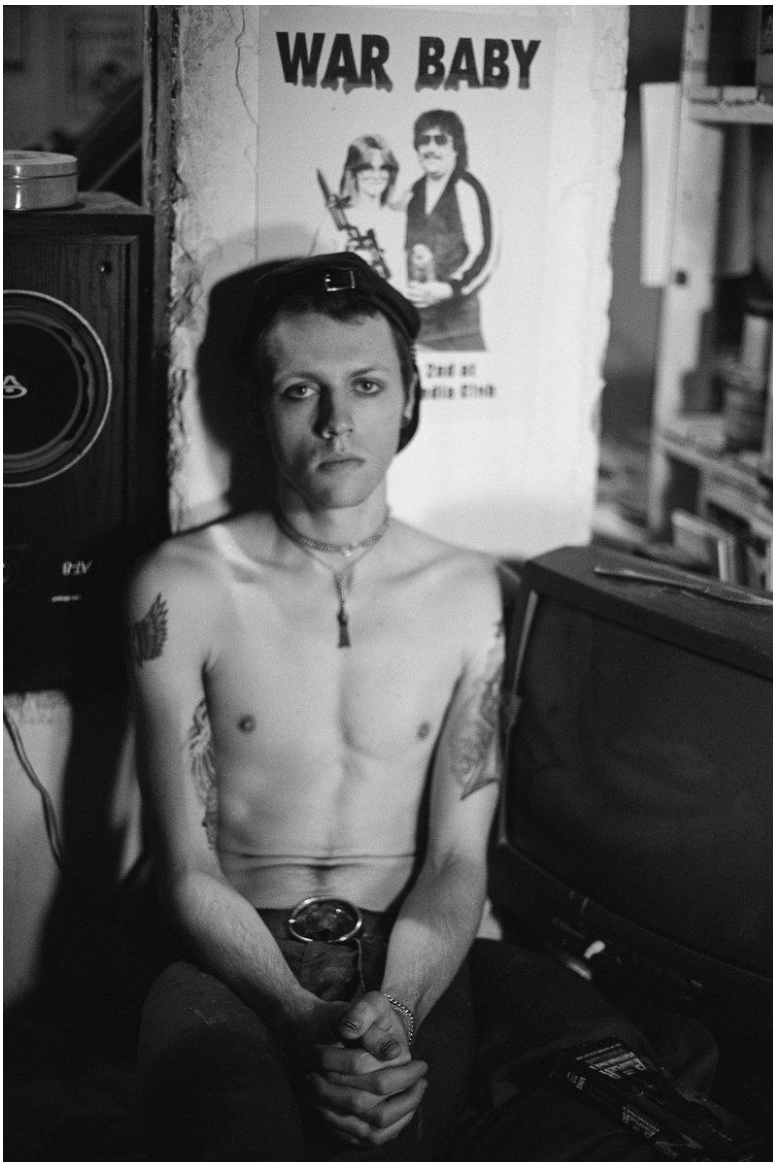


Image 6

(<http://tylerudall.com/>)



Image 8

(<http://tylerudall.com/>)

In his series, Udall combines the masculine and feminine, and shows how men can experience fragility. In this way, he puts gender stereotypes in perspective and shows how they can work limiting. He says: “Just as a woman shouldn’t only be praised for her ability to pose prettily in a photograph, so a man shouldn’t be glorified for refusing to show emotion, vulnerability and weakness. When genders are stereotyped, generalized and culturally enforced, everyone is forced to forget aspects of themselves” (Frank 2016b). Udall portrays men who refuse to perform their gender in the way society wants them to. It seems Udall’s point that we have to get rid off the idea that certain acts can confirm a certain gender identity. As Priscilla Frank correctly observes: “Udall’s photos reveal how feminism doesn’t just help protect and liberate women, but so-called “femininity” in all its human forms” (ibid). In combatting gender stereotypes, feminism does a service to boys and men who feel compelled to live up to this illusion of masculinity – as I have explained earlier, by quoting Chimamanda N. Adichie who argues that this is why we should all be feminists. In his art, Udall indirectly reproduces this argument, by showing that “[j]ust as girls can be hard, boys can be soft” (ibid).

In the next parts, I will develop the idea that masculinity is often assumed to be synonymous with heterosexuality, and that these social gender conventions play a significant role in homophobia, as homosexuality is often perceived of ‘containing a lack of masculinity’. That is why, in the next section, I will explain how gender conventions are

linked to conventions concerning (homo)sexuality, and I will demonstrate how toxic masculinities can implicate homophobia.

3.5 Masculinity as homophobia

“I’ll be honest, I don’t hope that you become such a queen.”

When I came out of the closet, these are the exact words someone told me. Not being aware of its homophobic character, this person basically told me that I had to stay ‘a man’ and that I had to be aware to not effeminate. This is exemplary of how, in general, gay men are perceived as less masculine than straight men – if they are perceived as masculine at all. Gay masculinity is, among others, clearly a subordinated masculinity.⁸ As Connell explains: “oppression positions it at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men: gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items of ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure.” and “patriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity” (Connell 2005; 78, 143). This is how sexualities become gendered; gay men are perceived as lacking masculinity or as feminine, whereas lesbian women are perceived as masculine – all because of the performative condition of gender. It is this way that hegemonic (heterosexual) masculinity has social authority⁹. Coming out as gay has immediate (negative) consequences for the perception of our masculinity, because “[a]fter all, we’ve committed the *great* masculine transgression of falling in love with another man” (Downs 2005; 123). By loving men instead of women, we broke with the masculine tradition which teaches us that a ‘real man’ is straight. Loving men refrains us from being able to achieve this status.

In his text *Masculinity as Homophobia* (1994), Kimmel argues that traditional masculinity is homophobic in the sense that every sign of femininity in a man has the consequence of emasculating criticism. As a consequence, boys develop a fear of being a sissy, a fear of being a faggot. In Chapter One, I explained that this is why the ‘fag identity’ is not only

⁸ Not only homosexuals are accused of being ‘less than manly’; Kimmel argues that, among others, nonnative-born men and men of color are too. (Kimmel 1994; 218)

⁹ Hegemony refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. Hegemonic masculinity, therefore, can be defined as the currently accepted form of masculinity, the dominant idea of what it means to be a man. (Connell 1995; 77)

something to avoid for gay boys/men who are in the closet, but it is something for men to avoid in general. As Pascoe says: “fag has as much to do with failing in the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or an anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with sexual identity” (2005; 330). She explains that when a boy is called a fag, it not necessarily means that he is accused of being homosexual, it means that he is accused of not being a man. This is how the ‘fag identity’ can be imposed on the body of every male individual – and this is how it becomes a (shamed) identity which is to be avoided and to be suppressed; something which I tried, every day.

Wake up

Act

Fade

Disappear

Run

Perform

Hide

Vanish

Sleep

These acts are however decisive for every man. Connell explains that normative definitions of masculinity face the problem that not many men actually meet the normative standards, which makes it clear that the avoidance of shame is a general activity for all men (1995; 79). This idea can also be found in the definition of homophobia that Kimmel gives, as he defines homophobia as something which goes beyond it meaning ‘having fear for/being against gay men’:

Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend. [...] Our fear is the fear of humiliation. We are ashamed to be afraid. Shame leads to silence – the silence that keeps other people believing that we actually approve of the things

that are done to woman, to minorities, to gays and lesbians in our culture.
(1994; 214)

All men are products of normative (gender) systems. However, we should bear in mind that the case of gay men is a particular case. In Chapter One, I have explained that the feeling of shame is caused by the gaze of the ideal other. Literary theorist David Leverenz, in his text on the role of masculinity in modern American literature, writes that “ideologies of manhood have functioned primarily in relation to the gaze of male peers and male authority” (1991; 769). This means that, for male homosexual subjects who cannot live up to this idea of manhood and heterosexual masculinity, their apartness is primarily exposed by their male peers who possess male authority (and who function as the ideal other): in other men, we evaluate our performances. This ideal man embodies the socialized and general definition of masculinity, of which heterosexuality is an important part. Namely, when we talk about socialized gender norms, we cannot ignore the fact that compulsory heterosexuality is a very important aspect – if not *the* most important.

3.6 Compulsory heterosexuality

With compulsory heterosexuality, we refer to the fact that men as well as women are ‘forced’ into heterosexual relationships (Connell 1995). According to Adrienne Rich, who wrote the text *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980), heterosexuality needs to be studied as a political institution through which non-normative sexualities (she explicitly talks about lesbianism) are rendered invisible. Also, as Rich states, compulsory heterosexuality powerfully affects sex roles (mothering), relationships and societal prescriptions (1980; 633). She continues her argument on how this affects the lives of women and how this preserves gender inequality, but I would like to state here that this idea has also consequences for the lives of male subjects. This idea namely implies that the male body should be disciplined to heterosexuality too; “that means other bodies as well as one’s own” (Connell 1995; 104). This means that, for most of us, our first (sexual) encounters were with the opposite sex because, in our minds, there was no other way possible. And still, for the ‘ideal man’, heterosexual encounters are the only possibility.

“I don’t have any problems with homosexuals, but please bear in mind that I don’t like seeing two men kissing in front of me.”

Ahmed argues that these political, heteronormative ideals not only function powerfully as a series of norms, but that they also work through emotions that shape bodies. The heteronormative discourse, for example, has a great influence on the every-day lives of homosexual subjects. She gives the example of the fact that we ask boys if they have a girlfriend, like we ask girls if they have a boyfriend. These moments are for all of us confrontations that we are actually “supposed to be heterosexual”. Ahmed says: “No matter how 'out' you may be, how (un)comfortable queer you may feel, those moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can be experienced as a bodily injury; a moment which position queer subjects as failed in their failure to live up to the 'hey you too' of heterosexual self-narration” (2004; 147). The repetition of these situations proves how our worlds is shaped by the visibility of heterosexuality, and the invisibility of everything that is not. Ahmed continues by arguing that this shows how we live in a world that is ‘shaped’ by heteronormative ideals, which means that the world is a place in which only heterosexual bodies will easily find comfort. “Heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in” (ibid; 148). This is how the world is dominated by straight bodies, and how, among others, the bodies of gay subjects are not allowed to fit in.

“During the Gay Pride, all the gay people take over the city. No, iew, that’s not something for me. Thanks.”

PRIDE AND AUTHENTICITY

Let me be clear: I'm proud to be gay, and I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me. Being gay has given me a deeper understanding of what it means to be in the minority and provided a window into the challenges that people in other minority groups deal with every day. It's made me more empathetic, which has led to a richer life. It's been uncomfortable at times, but it has given me the confidence to be myself, to follow my own path, and to rise above adversity and bigotry.

- Tim Cook

4.1 Introduction

In this third and final chapter, I will focus on the last part of my argument: the fact that homosexual subjects can achieve authenticity and pride through the process of coming-out. In the quote above, Tim Cook, who is the chief executive officer of Apple Inc., demonstrates that it is absolutely possible for homosexuals to achieve pride and to reform a gay identity after dealing with discomfort and shame. I do not want to claim that shame is a condition for pride and authenticity, as, simultaneously, I do not want to claim that every homosexual is able to reach this level of pride. Sedgwick for example states that shame remains a permanent structuring fact of identity (1990; 64) while Sally Munt says: “[s]hame has momentum, but its effects on the subject cannot be foreclosed, it is not ontologically secure” (2007; 103). However, in this chapter I will demonstrate that it is possible to refute shame through the discourse of pride, and that, through shame, we can achieve authenticity. As Munt argues for example: “[i]t is an aspect of the dynamism of shame that it can also produce a reactive, new self to form that has a liberatory energy” (ibid; 80). She argues that we should understand shame as a variegated emotion with effects which are not necessarily negative. Therefore, I will start this chapter by explaining how, in general, pride and ‘pridefulness’ are linked to shame. I will give an analysis of two philosophical texts, namely: *The Subtlety of Emotion* by Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, in which he engages with the term ‘prideful’, and Kristjan Kristjánsson’s *Pridefulness* (2001). I will show that prideful is a long-term emotion, and that it therefore refers more to a certain ‘state of being’ than to a someone who has achieved something that has positive consequences on the short term. After this analysis of what it means to be ‘prideful’ I will explore how this emotion can evoke transformation for gay people, once it is achieved. The chapter ends by two examples of reaching gay authenticity and gay pride. The first is

by Denice Froham, who wrote the provoking poem *Dear Straight People* (2013), in which she calls out for queer authenticity. The second example is my own story of reaching authenticity, which will function as the ultimate conclusion to this chapter.

4.2 The potential of shame

Before elaborating on the powerful feeling of pridefulness, I will explain how shame is not only inherently negative. In her book *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (2007), Sally Munt argues that shame has a potential, and that it can work as a catalyst for transformation. She says that feeling ashamed involves volatility: “it allows the subject to momentarily step outside linguistic determinability; it can then fall into abjection, or it can unfix itself and rise, in radical unpredictability” (103). Munt argues that shame’s loss brings uncertainty, but that we always desire reconnection with our core values and what is important to us. I will explain later how this has consequences for a reformulation of a gay identity after shame, but, in general, this means that we can find ourselves through shame. As Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, in his text on pridefulness and shame, says:

Shame expresses our deepest values and commitments, freeing ourselves from shame implies unloading these values and commitments. Freedom, Janis Joplin reminds us in a popular song, is when you have nothing more to lose. Shame is, then, a constitutive element in normative life. (2000; 514)

Here, Ben-Ze’ev explains that in shame, we find our deepest values and commitments. Shame helps us to find freedom, although it seems that we need to hit rock bottom to achieve this, as Ben-Ze’ev quotes Joplin who says that freedom is when you have nothing more to lose. Munt also stresses the fact that, through shame, we can find freedom and agency: “[r]emembering that shame is an embodied emotion which primarily resides in the face, centered on the composition of the gaze, it is as though acknowledging the injurious effects of shame can free us to grasp the transformative moment and *look them right back in the eye*” (2007; 100). In Chapter One I demonstrated that someone feels ashamed when they feel a failure in the eyes of the other. In the last quote, Munt says that we can actually reach a moment in time during which we can *look them right back in the eye* without feeling bad of what we do or of what we are. Helen Lynd also uses the metaphor of looking. She says: “Fully faced, shame may become not primarily something to be covered, but a positive experience of revelation” (1958; 20). Lynd seems to argue

here that when we have come to terms with the action or identity that is considered to be bad, and when we have it 'faced fully', it might turn out to be a positive experience of revelation. Returning to Munt, she explains that this process is an active process, in which the shamed subject must take responsibility and agency. She says: "Thus 'turning' is not so much 'to be turned' as the more agentic *to turn*, to rotate the axis of determination/signification in such a way as to deviate the terms" (2007; 100). This *turning point* can therefore change our self-image and how we deal with 'the terms'. Also, she explains that shame can liberate new grammars (of gender) which emerge in pride. This is not something that happens automatically; 'turning' is not something which happens all of a sudden. Munt explains that it is the more agentic 'to turn', agentic in the sense that we can choose for it ourselves. She says: "the mechanisms of shame are rotational: the body that is shamed is compelled to change by the action of the impressional force" (ibid; 103). Shame is therefore potentially productive: it implies motion, and although shame stays unpredictable in the sense that its consequences can be ambivalent, it can reproduce certain demanding effects. Regarding coming-out, the productive aspect of shame and the idea of having agency are of course very telling, but before I want to focus on the consequences of the 'turning' of shame for homosexuals, I will explain what the emotion 'pride' implies and what it means to see yourself as a good person. To do so, I will focus on the philosophical analysis of Kristjánsson and Ben-Ze'ev, who explain what it means to be 'prideful'.

4.3 Pridefulness

In his text *Pridefulness* (2001), Kristján Kristjánsson, who declares himself Aristotle-inspired, approaches the emotion of pride philosophically. He introduces the term 'pridefulness' to describe an emotion that differs conceptually from pride. "Pridefulness is to be located within a nexus of interrelated concepts, ranging from personhood, integrity, and self-respect, to honor and dignity" (165). In this text, Kristjánsson argues that pridefulness captures the meaning of a global positive attitude towards oneself, and that this is how pride and pridefulness differ. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev has also engaged philosophically with pridefulness, in his book *The Subtlety of Emotions* (2000). In the last chapter, which is on positive emotions and self-care, he says: "where pride is the emotion that arises from the belief that one has done a good thing, pridefulness is the emotion resulting from the belief that one is a good person" (510). In Ben-Ze'ev's eyes, a prideful

person sees oneself as a distinct person, a particular chooser whose choices are profoundly his own. Ben-Ze'ev defines pridefulness as the justified love for oneself. However, it must be distinguished from conceit and arrogance; these negative connotations are not part of this generally positive feeling.

Kristjánsson continues his philosophical analysis by taking over Aristotle's term *megalopsychos*, which he identifies as the emotion of pridefulness. He says: "*megalopsychos*, in addition to being self-respectful, realistically aware of his accomplishments, and episodically proud of his particular achievements, is also a 'proud person'" (169). A prideful subject is therefore a proud subject, but the term prideful implies more than 'just being proud'. It means that one has achieved self-respect, which is not something one can achieve by a range of separated positive achievements of which one is proud, even though these achievements *do* contribute to being a prideful person. Self-respect is achieved through a longer process of finding confidence, dignity and humility, possibly by transcending shame. As Lynd argues in her book *On Shame and The Search For An Identity* (1958): "Pride in the sense of self-respect transcends shame, but is fully consonant with humility. Only the man with true pride in his capacities as a human being can have a significant humility; only the truly humble in apprehending the immensity of the universe and the world beyond himself can have a significant pride – a sense of his own identity" (258). This is how a person who is prideful and therefore self-respectful, is not, at the moment, proud of anything in particular, but yet a 'proud person' (Kristjánsson 2001; 169).

Kristjánsson argues that, there are, however, uses of 'pride' where it refers to a person's self-respect: "this is the sense of "pride" inherent in popular slogans such as 'Gay Pride' or 'Black Pride'. Members of marginalized groups begin to consider some of their own properties, previously despised, as a source of self-respect, and goals and principles with which they positively identify" (ibid; 170). This would imply that the term 'Gay Pride' not only refers to a feeling of pride, but also to the state of having achieved self-respect. This is how the Gay Pride movement, the social movement which evolved into a major carnivalesque celebration and into the largest global LGBTQ+ event, is not only a celebration of pride but also a promotion of self-affirmation. Lory Britt, in her text *From Shame to Pride in Identity Politics* (2000), writes: "Being surrounded by thousands of queers extinguishes that terrible loneliness we experienced we feared we were the only

ones on earth who were that way” (264). Once we, as members of the LGBTQ+ community, have achieved self-respect and the (long-term) state of pridefulness, this is something that we want to expose, for which the Gay Pride is the ultimate occasion. Britt continues: “prideful behavior occupies public space, or more simply, involves public display” (ibid; 254). This is the perfect example of how the shame/pride binary works. In Chapter One and Two, I demonstrated that in shame we hide. This example of the Gay Pride shows that if we are able to find self-respect and pride, this is something that we want to expose. In the next part, I will further examine what it implies to convert shame into positive feelings as pride and self-respect.

4.4 Meaning, purpose and satisfaction

“Being out is equated with being “who you are”, and it is a necessary foundation for happiness” (Barbone 1994; 95).

We have seen that, according to Kristjánsson, to be prideful means that someone is a distinct person whose choices are profoundly his own. Also, we have seen that in shame there is a moment during which one can convert the bad feeling into a rather good feeling, a moment which Munt called the moment of turning. These two aspects come together when we examine what the consequences are of coming-out as homosexual. Note: I do not want to claim that these (positive) consequences of disclosure are universal. I am aware of the fact that being able to come out is a (Western) privilege, and, besides, that some people will never be able to refute shame. However, that is not my point here. Namely, I want to argue that ‘being out’ is not synonymous with ‘never being ashamed anymore’, but that, when we have dealt with shame through the process of coming-out, this means that we can ‘finally’ be ourselves and give meaning to our lives. As Munt for example argues: after shame “we truss ourselves more firmly to ourselves” and “cohering into a particular life-story, a historical identity, a set of residual memories and somatic associations that we nominate as the woolly entity “myself” (2007; 218). In both quotes, Munt stresses we come closer to ourselves in the sense that we form our own identity, which we can truly call ‘myself’. As Robert Solomon states, in his book *True to our Feelings* (2000): “whether we think of pride simply in terms of a sense of accomplishments, or some larger sense of superiority, a self-confidence or as self-respect or in the more questionable guise of self-righteousness, it feels good to be proud. It feels good to be oneself” (90). Being proud/prideful, Solomon argues, does not only mean ‘having

achieved something'. It also means that we can be 'who we are', and that we are not ashamed anymore of the choices we (want to) make. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev gives a very telling short example of what Solomon explains here. In his text on pridefulness, cited before, he writes:

- For a long time, I was ashamed of the way I lived.
- Did you reform?
- No, I'm not ashamed anymore. (2000; 512)

People do not reform through shame. Not in general, but neither does the gay man. On the contrary, we are able to find our true selves, respect ourselves and to claim our own place in society. Adam Downs, at the end of his book, states: "having broken free from the stronghold of shame and the pain of trauma, the gay man begins to build his life – a life of meaning, purpose and satisfaction." He continues: "[i]t is the time in life, whether he is twenty-two or seventy-five, that he is truly free to become a unique individual who is able to become his own man, and in the process, find real contentment" (155). Downs' words, but also those of Ben-Ze'ev remind us of the fact that gay subjects, as individuals, do not change through the process of coming-out, in the sense of 'becoming someone else'. However, we *do* change in the sense that we transform into the person we always were, but that we were hiding in the prison of shame: the closet. In Chapter One, I argued that when we are in the closet, we play the role of the ideal-self, which Downs calls the 'pseudo-self'. This pseudo-self disappears once we have been through the meaningful process of coming-out. This is exactly the change I am talking about: the change from the pseudo-selves to our real selves.

The fact that this process is meaningful, is proven by the study of Julie Konik and Abigail Stewart. Analyzing the implications of sexual identity development, their hypothesis was that:

Heterosexual-identified individuals will be more likely to score high on the less advanced stages of global identity development (diffusion, foreclosure, and moratorium) than sexual-minority identified participants. People who identify as heterosexual may do so because they have not questioned our culture's "compulsory heterosexuality"; they also may not question the other domains of their identity. In contrast, people who take on a sexual minority identity are

likely to engage in a process of identity exploration that may well extend into other domains (2004; 822).

The fact that they prove this hypothesis right, means that people with same-sex desires are generally more aware of 'who they are'. Not only concerning their sexuality, but also concerning other aspects. Konik writes: "we conclude that although developing a sexual minority identity often involves enduring a painful process of accepting one's identity in a society where this identity is frequently viewed as deviant, individuals often emerge with a more developed global identity" (ibid; 841). Konik confirms my above statement: pride and authenticity is not something that appears all of a sudden. We must go through a painful process, as we have seen in Chapter One and Two of this thesis (if we are able to come out at all). This is why, as Konik explains, people with same-sex desires score significantly higher in the category "identity achievement". This means that, once we have reached the point in which we can come to terms with who we are, and we have been through the "effortful process", we can live a self-respectful and prideful life.¹⁰

Being out can therefore be very advantageous to ourselves. However, in his *text Coming Out, Being Out, and Acts of Virtue* (1994), Steven Barbone calls it as well an educational gift to the gay community as a gift to people who are not part of a sexual minority. Being out helps people, gay or not, to better understand what it means to be gay and to replace stereotypes. Every individual who comes out, allows a greater diversity and self-expression, and ensures gay-people a less hostile world. As Barbone explains:

Each time even one gay person *comes out* to [a] non-gay person, their world view is challenged, their fears about homosexuality are confronted, and their level of understanding is raised. The awareness that a person one loves or respects is gay often has profound impact on a non-gay individual's willingness to reexamine his or her ideas, attitudes, and feelings about our lives and our rights. (97)

¹⁰ I want to state once more that I am aware of the fact that going through this effortful process of coming-out is not possible for everyone. However, the differences in identity achievement (for homosexuals) and identity foreclosure (for heterosexuals) is an important difference which underlines the fact that coming-out and sexuality disclosure can in fact be a very meaning full and satisfying process. To further examine these differences, I would like to refer to the text "Sexual identity development in the context of compulsory heterosexuality" (2004) by J. Konik and A. Stewart.

This is how coming-out is not only beneficial for one's own authenticity and identity development, but also for a better world, as also the next example explains.

- But dad, at this moment in time, would you still rather see me with a girl than a boy?
 - No I don't think so....
 - Are you sure? I mean, you can just tell me if it's the case, I don't mind.
 - Son, I'm so sure. Please, keep kissing boys in the street.
-

There are two other examples of gay subjects which have found authenticity, and for which coming-out has been beneficial. The first one is from Denice Froham, who wrote the poem "Dear Straight People", in which she reclaims her own sexuality and literally screams out her authenticity. The second example is the last auto-ethnographic text of this thesis, in which I want to stress that for me, coming-out has not only been difficult but that it has gotten me really far and that I still benefit from it every-day.

4.5 "Dear straight people"

Denice Froham is an award-winning poet and writer who has written the poem *Dear Straight People*, which she performed for the first time in 2013. In her poems, Froham explores the tension between the stories we tell ourselves and the stories that are told about us.¹¹ "As a queer woman from a multi-cultural background (Puerto Rican and Jewish), her work centers the nuances of identity, disrupts ideas of power, and seeks to celebrate the parts of ourselves deemed unworthy" (denicefroham.com). To see how shame is imposed on her, how she deals with it and how she is trying to find authenticity I will offer a close-reading of her poem here.

In *Dear Straight People*, Froham introduces straight people and non-straight people as polar opposites. Accusations are thrown from the side of a gay person.

Dear straight people

Who do you think you are?

This is how, from the start, straight people are introduced as 'the enemy'. Sally Munt has argued that the process of individuation, of creating a self, works through this opposition: "the need for an enemy, therefore, may be a necessary step towards a conception of self

¹¹ The poem in its entirety can be found in appendix 1.

as a separate identity” (2007; 102). In this poem, in which straight people are addressed in-their-face, Froham’s authentic and separated identity is created through emphasizing that straight people are indeed ‘the enemy’. This is emphasized once more when she, in the middle of her poem, says:

Dear straight allies
Thank you, more please!

Froham makes clear that there is a difference between straight people and straight allies. Those who are not allies are ‘the straight people’ whom she addresses her poem to. This makes it even more clear that these are the people who are perceived as the enemy.

In the beginning of the poem already, it becomes clear why she considers straight people to be the enemy. She says:

Dear straight people
You’re the reason we stay in the closet
You’re the reason we even have a closet
I don’t like closets, but you made the living room an unshared space and
now I’m feeling like a guest in my own house.

This is how Froham stresses the fact that we live in a (heteronormative) society in which it is for her not possible to take authenticity for granted. Compulsory heterosexuality, which I explained in Chapter Two is the fact that every person is forced into heterosexual relationships, is the reason we have a closet, she seems to state here. Froham makes clear that the closet is an uncomfortable place by saying that ‘we feel like a guest in our own house.’ She seems to confirm the argument of Ahmed, which I cited before, that: “[h]eteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that already have taken their shape. Those spaces are lived comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in” (2004; 148). By stating that the ‘straight people’ are the reason we stay in the closet, she confirms that public spaces have taken the shape which allows only heterosexual bodies to fit in, and that it is at first not possible to live a publicly homosexual life. By focusing on the closet, Froham makes clear that, in general, every non-straight person is confronted with feelings of shame and discomfort, which she seems to conform a little later in the poem, by saying:

Dear straight people

Kissing my girlfriend in public without looking to see who's around is a luxury I do not fully have yet.

Froham makes clear that homosexual subjects are shaped, or at least influenced, by shame and social conventions about what one can and what one cannot do. At the same time, she says that showing intimacy is a luxury she does not fully have *yet*. The word 'yet' underlines that she is aware of the potential, and it also shows her willingness to take action. As she says herself, she is "calling for reparations". She wants to fight back and calls up for authenticity, although she is clearly bewildered why this is still necessary:

Why do I have to prove my love is authentic?

Why do I have to prove my love is authentic?

Why do I have to prove my love is authentic?

This is how she underlines the fact that heterosexuals consider their sexuality authentic, whereas homosexuals are considered less authentic or are at least asked questions about their sexual identity. She for example transforms the question 'when did you realize you were gay?' into:

When did you realize you were straight? Who taught you?

This transformation emphasizes the fact that same-sex desires are considered inauthentic, or at least less authentic than heterosexuality, as we find it normal to we ask these questions to gay people, but when they are applied in this way and addressed to straight people they alienate us. This is how she makes use of the pervasive message that our identities are considered to be inauthentic. In the last part, however, she continues that she is calling for reparations, and reclaims her authenticity. She proudly screams:

[...] tonight, I am drunk in my freedom,
grab her hand on the busiest street corner in Philadelphia,
zip my fingers into hers and press our lips firmly,
until we melt their stares into a standing ovation, imagine
that we are in a sea of smiling faces,

It is clear that she does not care anymore about the opinions of straight people – she declares herself a free woman. However, this is also how she shows that shame will

forever be a regulating emotion in our lives, as we will always be confronted with 'their stares', however proud and out we might be. Besides, 'the sea of smiling faces' is only something we can 'imagine' or that we can think of when we are 'drunk in freedom'. In the last section of the poem, she says:

digging deep into each other's eyes we say,
"Hey Baby, can't nothing stop this tonight"
because tonight, this world is broken
and we're the only thing
that's going to keep it together.

This very positive conclusion can be read as a victory over the enemy. Despite the fact that Froham is still influenced by everyday heterosexism and oppression, she has found a way to live her sexuality in a prideful way. Besides, she incites the LGBTQ+ community to take their own action, as 'we are the only thing that is going to keep this world together'. The 'we' not only seems to refer to Froham and her partner, but also to the LGBTQ+ community who, as I explained before, can offer a gift to the community and live a prideful and authentic life. Lastly, I want to state that we cannot forget about the fact that she has found the power to write about her experiences in this creative way and that she 'exposes' her sexuality on stage, which makes it clear that she has already achieved pridefulness, in the sense that she has erased shame and that 'nothing can stop her' from being who she is and that she is not afraid of being shamed. This powerful act is therefore the perfect example of how gay people are indeed able to reform a gay identity, and it is very clear how this is done through feelings of shame.

In the text which follows, I explored my own journey to authenticity. It demonstrates one last time that it is indeed possible to achieve authenticity, and that this process is in the beginning dominated by feelings of shame. In the text, I tried to cope with the same things as Denice Froham in her poem (compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, exposure and pridefulness), as it has become clear that these have all been (and still are) important aspects in the forming of my/our identity. In this way, the text can be read as a continuation of Froham's poem, and, besides, this is how it functions as another foundation of my central argument.

4.6 From 'straight' to gay: choosing authenticity

As I told you, there have been days that I dreamed about being straight. There have even been days that I *tried* being straight; these were the worst. They made me realize that I was not living a lie, but that I was a living lie. However, it didn't stop me from trying. Worse still, it made me try harder.

Yes. There have been days that I dreamed about being straight. When someone would give me the chance to turn into a straight person, I would do it without a doubt. I would immediately do it and celebrate my straightness, my normalness. If one would offer me that chance today, however, I would reject it.

The process of coming-out has not only been a disclosure to the people around me. From the beginning, when I started posing questions about who I was, till the end (if there is one), it has also been a process of disclosure of myself to myself. I raised questions, not only about my sexuality but also about my place in society and what I'm doing here. This obligated process of self-investigation has led me to places which would otherwise be left unvisited.

Once I was ready for it and found answers to all these questions, and once I was ready to *live* the answers to these questions, I didn't care anymore about normalness, or straightness, or whatever it was that I cared about before.

The choices I make are mine. And it might sound weird, but after a whole period of thinking 'what would be the best option in the eyes of the people around me?' that feels fucking awesome. Remember; I came home from school, afraid to write down "I'm gay" because it would become the truth, once it would be out there. A truth which I was not able to face and to which, I thought, the people around me would not agree. I'm happy things can change over time, and that I can now proudly and without any feelings of shame write the last words of this chapter. This is to my seventeen-year-old self:

I'm gay, and that's okay.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have shown how shame can control the bodies of (male) homosexuals, but, to a larger extent, this thesis has shown how illusions decide how we move in this world. Illusions about how it should and how it shouldn't be; illusions about what is the truth. Eve Sedgwick for example explained that people believe in the illusion that there exists a secure version of masculinity (1990; 84). This illusion is based on stereotypes and comes from the fact that gender is performed. The fact that people are still convinced that a man has to fit in this small and hard cage (in which they have to hide their true self and in which they cannot be vulnerable) is not only harmful for men in general; I explained that this belief can have enormous consequences for gay men in the closet. As another illusion is still that 'being male' is synonymous with 'being heterosexual', we have seen that this creates an enormous pressure on boys to be heterosexual, and that this is how the 'fag identity' is a shamed identity and therefore to be avoided.

The gay closet is the ultimate place for shame avoidance. In order to avoid the shame with which we are confronted, we hide in the metaphorical construction of the closet, and we create a pseudo-self who tries to cope with the world around him which is run by illusions. This pseudo-self pretends to be heterosexual, as this is what is expected and which is even 'compulsory'. We can almost say that the life we live in this closet is *yet* another illusion. However, this place is not only a place for shame avoidance, it is also the place in which we experience shame to the fullest. I demonstrated that, for example, in this place we can find out that people do not only think we are a 'faggot' (with all its bad connotations), we let ourselves believe that we are one. We can take on the bad feeling, and we can feel enormously ashamed of what we are.

This is how coming-out works as a sort of coping-mechanism. We try to cope with all the illusions that the people around us consider to be the truth, to such an extent that we come to believe in them ourselves as well. We have to convince ourselves of the fact that these illusions do not apply to us and that this is not a bad thing; it is okay to not live up to social norms. Once we have escaped the place of the closet and got rid of our pseudo-self, we can aim for a prideful and authentic life. We can convert the state of being ashamed into to the state of being prideful; the state in which we think about ourselves as a good person. Shame is therefore potentially productive. It can liberate new grammars (of gender)

which emerge in pride. These new grammars of gender will contest the normative illusions, in a way that creates new possible ways of interpreting the world around us. This process of 'turning' and coping with the world is not something that just happens all of a sudden. It is a process for which one needs honesty, power, agency and confidence. This is why we can conclude that coming-out is a vulnerable, but at the same time a very powerful act, through which we can disclose who we really are.

In short, I have shown how powerful the normative can be. I have shown how people can think they have the power over (sexual) minorities and how shaming plays an important role in this process. I also have explained how this can lead to gay oppression and discriminatory acts. However, I want to end with a more positive note, and remark once more that this thesis has also shown that it is possible to change, and that this is a process as well for homosexual subjects as for the people around them. This is what my father has shown when he told me the following words, which are also the words of a song by Greg Holden and which I would like to be the last words of this thesis:

My son, keep kissing boys in the street.

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APPENDIX 1

Dear Straight People,

Who do you think you are?

Do you have to make it so obvious that I make you uncomfortable?

Why do I make you uncomfortable?

Do you know that makes me uncomfortable?

Now we're both uncomfortable.

Dear Straight People,

You're the reason we stay in the closet.

You're the reason we even have a closet.

I don't like closets, but you made the living room an unshared space
and now I'm feeling like a guest in my own house.

Dear Straight People,

Sexuality and gender? Two different things
combined in many different ways.

If you mismatch your socks, you understand.

Dear Hip-Hop,

Why are you fascinated with discovering gay rappers?

Gay people rap. Just like gay people ride bikes and eat tofu.

Dear Straight People,

I don't think God has a sexual orientation,
but if she were straight, she'd be a dope ally.

Why else would she invent rainbows?

Dear Straight Women,

I mean, "Straight Women."

Leave me the fuck alone!

Dear Straight Men,

If I'm flirting with you, it's because I think it's funny. Just laugh.

Dear Straight People,

I'm tired of proving that my love is authentic. So I'm calling for reparations.

When did you realize you were straight? Who taught you?

Did it happen because your parents are divorced?

Did it happen because your parents are not divorced?

Did it happen because you sniffed too much glue in 5th grade?

Dear Straight People,

Why do I have to prove my love is authentic?

Why do I have to prove my love is authentic?

Why do I have to prove my love is authentic?

Why do you have to stare at me when I'm holding my girlfriend's hand like I'm about to rob you?

Dear Straight People,

You make me want to fuckin' rob you!

Dear Straight Allies,

thank you, more please!

Dear Straight Bullies,

You're right. We don't have the same values.

You kill everything that's different, I preserve it.

Tell me, what happened to

Jorge Mercado?

Sakia Gunn?

Lawrence King?

What happened to the souls alienated

in between too many high school walls,

who planned the angels of their deaths in math class,

who imagined their funerals as ticker-tape parades,

who thought the afterlife was more like an after party.

Did you notice that hate

is alive and well in too many lunch rooms,

taught in the silence of too many teachers,
passed down like second hand clothing
from too many parents?

Dear Queer Young Girl,

I see you.

You don't want them to see you so you change the pronouns in your love poems to "him"
instead of "her."

I used to do that.

Dear Straight People,

You make young poets make bad edits.

Dear Straight People,

Kissing my girlfriend in public without looking to see who's around is a luxury I do not
fully have yet.

But tonight, I am drunk in my freedom,
grab her hand on the busiest street corner in Philadelphia,
zip my fingers into hers and press our lips firmly,
until we melt their stares into a standing ovation, imagine
that we are in a sea of smiling faces,
even when we're not
and when we're not,
we start shoveling,
digging deep into each other's eyes we say,
"Hey Baby, can't nothing stop this tonight"
because tonight, this world is broken
and we're the only thing
that's going to keep it together.