

Welcome to My Closet

For many years, I have struggled to come to terms with the fact that I am not straight. There are many labels that have been slapped on me, and there are some that I have created for myself. I wonder how it is even possible for me to create a persona for myself when my family thinks that I am too young to know who I am, to know what I want. How can I figure myself out when there are other people trying to tell me who I am? The fear of not being accepted by my peers and my family eats at me every day; I fear the day that I come out to my parents. The simple phrase, “I’m gay” escaping my lips is not one that I am excited to say out loud to them.

This installation captures the essence of what it is like to be in my closet. The panels capture the questions that often pop up into my head. On one panel, I put together a photo collage in order to describe who I am because it is up to the viewer's interpretation. Different people know different versions of who I am and I am curious to know how the version that people know will impact the memory that they have of me. Does it matter if they know that I am pansexual or that I use they/them pronouns? Does that change how they perceive me? The other panels explore the theme of identity. I have always questioned what I want, whether it is about my future or sexual preferences. I decided to illustrate what I want at the moment and how I feel at the moment.

By being vulnerable to the audience, it is easier for me to understand that everything will be okay. The opinions that others have about me shouldn't worry me. I should be more open with others in order to facilitate communication and to prepare for the ultimate “coming-out” talk with my parents.

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I have struggled to come to terms with my queer identity. How could I come to terms with something if I don't even know what makes up identity? There are many labels that have been slapped on me, there are some that I have created for myself. I wonder how it is even possible for me to create a persona for myself when my family thinks that I am too young to know who I am, to know what I want. How can I figure myself out when there are other people besides my family trying to put input on who I am? The fear of not being accepted by my peers and my family eats at me every day; I fear the day of coming out to my parents. The simple phrase, "I'm gay" escaping my lips is not one that I am excited to say out loud to them.

I. INTRODUCTION: TAKE A SEAT, YOU'RE IN FOR A RIDE.

During a crisp December Sunday morning, I was sitting in the middle of my Sunday class. We were encouraged to question our religion as our teacher would provide us the answers and help us fully understand. I was struggling to understand why gay marriage was not permitted in the church if God accepted everyone. My thoughts lingered on this topic for a while because I had just come to terms with not being straight. I summed up the courage to ask my teacher and was met with a subtle laugh. "Gay people are not allowed to marry each other in the church because they cannot reproduce; the purpose of marriage is to bring new life into the world." I was left in shock. "There are many straight couples that cannot reproduce and have the option to have a surrogate or adopt. Gay couples have options but don't have the same right to marry?" As I finished my sentence, one of my classmates had a moment of realization.

"Oh my God, you're gay! Aren't you?!"

"Should've known you were a fag!"

"Why is she even allowed to be in this class? She's going straight to hell anyway."

The teacher had just stood there with a slight smirk on her face. Tears were rushing to my eyes but I tried as hard as I could to not show that I was in pain; that it was true. I am gay. I fled as soon as class was dismissed and cried in an abandoned bathroom in the church. I was around thirteen at the time and at that point, we were all confused about things.

I was in the stage of identity moratorium.¹ I could not talk to my parents about what I was experiencing because I was afraid of being shut down due to the fact that teenager experiencing new feelings. I was too young to know what I wanted and who I was and my mom thought so too.²

II. WHAT EVEN IS IDENTITY?

I believe that our identity is defined by external factors that contribute to predetermined character traits, associated with the environment and social settings that we were raised in. We are also defined by where we come from³ as there are stereotypical associations that come along

¹ According to Marcia's Identity Status Theory, identity moratorium is the status in which the adolescent is currently in a crisis, exploring various commitments and is ready to make choices, but has not made a commitment to these choices yet. I was committed to the idea that I was not straight I just did not know what defined my sexuality at the time. I jumped from bisexual and pansexual for a long time.

² I attempted to come out to my mom several weeks later. It made me feel even worse. My mom and I have not touched on the topic in about three years now and I do not think it will be coming up in conversation anytime soon.

³ Where do we come from? People may answer this question in different ways and they are all correct responses. People may come from a place, they may even say that they come from an object. That object could have a history

with that. I do not believe that a gene can determine who we are; personality is a complex trait influenced by everything. I am defined by the “big eight” social identifiers⁴, to society I am an able-bodied Hispanic sixteen-year-old gender non-conforming pansexual Catholic who is of the lower class. I am still not able to answer the race question because I do not identify with any of the options provided in national surveys or standardized tests. I am also defined by character traits that others use to describe me - loving, caring, assertive, passive-aggressive, annoying. I struggle with being defined by one of these identifiers because it limits who I am without people meaning to.

Who determines what identity is? There are many theorists whose speculations that begin to scratch the surface of all of the possibilities. Erik Erikson believed that there were eight distinct stages, five of which happened during adolescence and three beyond. He believed in the epigenetic principle⁵ and that each stage would result in a positive or negative outcome for personality development. I believe that there are different stages in our life that determine characteristics that may impact us in the future. I do not completely support the epigenetic principle because personal development does not happen in chronological order just like lists are not completed in order that they are written in.⁶ There is no linear connection between them which is what Erikson’s successor, James E. Marcia, believed in. Marcia created the “Four Identity Statuses of Psychological Identity” which extended and refined Erikson’s work; he assumed that it was a fact that the adolescent stage is not composed of identity resolution or identity confusion but instead the idea that one has explored and committed to an identity in a variety of life domains.⁷ The concept of adolescence not being purely filled with confusion or commitment makes sense because people continue to question who they are beyond their teenage years, others know aspects of who they are before they even enter that stage. Identity resolution and identity confusion is a lifelong situation, it does not have to happen within a short span of six years. Both Erikson and Marcia believed in existentialism⁸, the concept that individuals create their identity through their actions and choices. Part of who we are is composed of our actions

that represents who they are. What I mean by where we come from is quite literal; the place where we originated. Even that question has a lot of answers. I could say Mexico and the United States or I could say Manhattan and the Bronx. In this situation, I am referring to our ancestors, our place of origin.

⁴ The “Big Eight” Social Identifiers - Ability, Age, Ethnicity, Gender, Race, Religion/Spirituality, Sexual Orientation, and Socioeconomic Status. This term was created by the National Association of Independent Schools in order to start a discussion about privilege. These have defined students at my school since their first ethics class. The “Big Eight” has always made me uncomfortable because it feels like I am exposing too much about myself. It is information that should not define who I am but it does because it is how society works.

⁵ The belief that the personality develops in a predetermined order, and builds upon each previous stage.

⁶ There are some things that do happen in order; we have to learn how to crawl before we learn how to walk and learn how to walk before we learn how to run. It is not complete bologna, I just do not support the idea that our personality is formed in a certain order. Some learn how to trust before others, others learn how to communicate before others. It doesn’t all come at once nor does it come at a certain time.

⁷ What Marcia means by life domains is the exploration and commitment of vocation, religion, relations choices, gender roles, and so on. To me, this makes a lot more sense than Erikson did.

⁸ A philosophy concerned with creating self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief that people are forming themselves throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook.

and the choices that we make because of it there are different outcomes that determine who we become in the future. The environment that one grows up in can also influence the choices that they make as certain communities/environments to have stereotypical characteristics that people feel like they have to act upon.⁹

The mind is able to influence the actions that the body takes. We are able to express our feelings physically. The positioning of our bodies, the postures, gestures, and facial expressions can also influence the mind as it impacts the way people think, feels, and behave.¹⁰ Our actions and choices make up our social identity which categorizes individuals into broad, socially defined labels. People change based on our response to our peers, family, and school, among other social environments. Our self-identities shape our perceptions of belonging; how we define ourselves and forms the basis of our self-esteem. We change and develop over the course of our lives, it is how we form our personal environment; people show who they are through the clothes they wear and how they interact with others. There are various traits that one has, all of them interact in order to make the person who they are. Not one trait is more important than the other but it may be noticeable. I have many identities, I am not solely “this or that.” I am not just that gay kid in one of your classes, I am so much more than that. That is only one small part of my identity but somehow it manages to become the topic of conversations.

It was a chaotic Saturday afternoon with James Sansing, we all needed a break. The night before I had invited everyone at school to go bowling but it ended up being five of us. I had gone ‘bowling’¹¹ with an amazing group of people and I was happier than usual. Entering my dorm, you could feel a wave a judgment where I was met with the question, “Why are you so happy?”

“I just went bowling with people from West C.¹² It was really fun.”

“Oh, the gay squad!”

“Please don’t call it that.”

I scurried off to my room, shutting the door behind me.¹³ I was trying to process the comment that had just been made; it may not sound like something offensive but it was due to the fact that a group of people was given a name due to the way that they express themselves either verbally or physically. This is a part

⁹ This is the concept behind behaviorism which according to Learning Theories, is the worldview that operates on a principle of “stimulus-response.”

¹⁰ According to Berkeley Wellness, acts such as handwashing can have a psychologically cleansing effect, lessening feelings of guilt and remorse. There are also things such as power poses which can make a person feel more powerful and in charge; they also had an increase in testosterone and a decrease in the stress hormone cortisol.

¹¹ Bowling sounded a lot cooler than saying I was in an arcade with an amazing group of people. We gathered all of our tickets in order to redeem a rat, nine dinosaurs, and a tootsie roll in return. Bowling just sounded cooler than saying that.

¹² West C- One of the dorms on the west side of the Oxbow school. The third dorm on the west side; the first dorm when you go up that big staircase. So many stairs.

¹³ This is the passive-aggressive character trait that most definitely defines me. Due to this experience and other factors, there was a lot of door slamming in my dorm for a while. The door slam only got progressively louder. Oh well.

of my identity that I do not like to be called out on it; I am open about this identifier with people, but I dislike when it is singled out. I do not just feel this way about being queer, I feel the same way with being Mexican-American. I tend to struggle with being defined by a single identifier or isolating an identifier because it makes me feel uncomfortable being labeled as only one thing and having that thing defining me. All of the social identifiers overlap which creates a unique experience of how they go about in the world. Whenever one of my identifiers is singled out, I associate the situation with that horrible Sunday class in Church. It does not matter how small the problem is, it always goes back to that.¹⁴

III. I'M NOT STRAIGHT, NOW WHAT? OH, GENDER IS ALSO A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT? GREAT.

Ever since I was little, I had trouble knowing that I was different and that I was not considered “normal.” Looking through magazines, I would not pay attention to the male models but to the women walking down the runway. I forced myself to shun the idea of liking girls as my stepdad would poke fun at those that were different regarding their sexuality.

When I was in third grade, I visited Mexico for my uncle's wedding. When I encountered my soon-to-be aunt, I mentioned to my cousin that she was guapa¹⁵ but she made fun of me because it is not the appropriate word to use when complimenting another woman. I had used the word grammatically correct but she continued to cry out of laughter. She had assumed that I was attracted to my uncle's fiance and she ran off to tell him. I was really confused as to why the wording mattered but my family made a huge deal out of it; my uncle poked fun at me for the rest of my stay because it sounded like I wanted to steal his wife.¹⁶ When you are a little kid and your family is already making assumptions about your sexuality, it is really easy to assimilate to social norms/ideals.

The possibility of me not being straight did not come up again until I was in eighth grade. I was scrolling through YouTube where I stumbled upon “Girls like Girls,” by Hayley Kiyoko.¹⁷ I had this video on repeat for about thirty

¹⁴ That Sunday class was very traumatic for me, it is the reason why I am very sensitive to being singled out. Being put on the spot about anything freaks me out. It would be really interesting to see what aspects of my personality are now more hidden due to that.

¹⁵ The direct translation is beautiful or lovely. I thought it was okay to say this because, in the U.S., everyone compliments everyone for every little thing. It is kind of funny and uplifting. Apparently, I should have only said “*Se ve bien.*” A simple but quick compliment to state that my aunt looked fine or okay.

¹⁶ It really was not that big of a deal until my family made it one. My cousins now have their own assumptions about me which are unsettling but it is fine because I do not talk to them.

¹⁷ Hayley Kiyoko is dubbed “Lesbian Jesus” by many of her fans. She is this amazing singer, songwriter, actress, dancer, and director who addresses queerness in her songs; I feel like she gets the mind set that queer teens are in and writes songs about how they feel. I turn to a lot of her music because it is the only way I can express queerness at home because my parents do not question lyrics that I burst out singing in the shower.

minutes in order to understand the plotline of the video and to understand the lyrics. The video and song are about a girl who likes her best friend but her friend has a boyfriend. She hangs out with her friend a lot and she is in a state of confusion because she is experiencing all of these new feelings towards her. She finally gives in to her feelings and kisses her friend in front of her boyfriend, which turns out really badly because the boyfriend ends up fighting with her. Before encountering this video, I would get really jealous when my best friend would hang out with guys; I would get the same sensation of lust around her that I got around guys, the constant thinking about her and wanting to flirt with her was something that never left my mind.¹⁸ When I saw this video and processed it, I had a moment of realization. The light bulb went off in my head and I realized that I had been attracted¹⁹ to my best friend for the past three years.²⁰ I realized that I did not just have feelings for boys but I also had those feelings for girls. This was a moment that I had been trying to put off for a while; my subconscious knew but they were feelings that I was not ready to deal with or explore²¹

I soon figured how to be comfortable in my own skin. There was no outer change for me to feel uncomfortable about, my feelings just forced me to act upon things differently. The change was emotional, the realization of my feelings was something that took longer than five minutes to get comfortable with. I often wondered if I was going to marry a man in order to please my parent's traditional views. I thought for a while that other people just would not view me the same; if they were going to distance themselves from me because I was not straight.²² It took me more than half a year to be able to tell people without constantly worrying that they were going to judge me. My level of comfort now still varies depending on the level of acceptance in the environment I am in.

Oxbow²³ helped me get to a place where I was fully comfortable with who I am; it helped me uncover another part of myself. Just seeing others embrace who they are encouraged me to express myself; nothing seemed off limits here, you're supposed to be able to be the most realistic version of yourself. When I

¹⁸ When I say, "ignore," I really do mean ignore. I would pretend like that was not happening, I thought I was very concerned about her wellbeing and that some guy would end up hurting her. That was why I thought I was worried. But no, I was just gay.

¹⁹ Like super attracted to her.

²⁰ That did not go well at all. This past summer was when that blew up in my face but that is a story for another time.

²¹ Feelings. They are never something that I am able to handle or deal with properly. I thought this was a phase but seeing that music video made me realize that I had the mentality that this was a phase, that it never crossed my mind that it was a part of who I was. Having some random singer help me realize that was important to me because I would have just kept pushing it off until I "experimented" in college or something.

²² Thankfully, this hasn't happened.

²³ Oxbow - the most amazing experience of my life. One semester away from everything. Just me, school, and art. What else could a teenager ask for, it's like heaven on earth.

filled out the forms for Oxbow, I wrote down MJ as my preferred name as a way to try something new in this environment. I grew so attached to my nickname that I would feel anger and sadness when someone other than my family members called me María. This threw me in a loop, I started to question what it meant. I spent restless hours thinking about the subject, confused about who I was. It did not help me when people had uncalled for reactions to the decision that I had come to. I wanted to use they/them pronouns and identify as gender non-conforming; I wanted to introduce this new part of my identity without having to come out personally to every person at Oxbow, therefore, I wrote it down on my whiteboard. People had come in and out of my room, others knew by word of mouth.²⁴ Someone had come into my room and their reaction was one that I was not expecting:

“What?” They said while pointing at my whiteboard.

“What?”

“Are you sure this is how you want to present yourself?”²⁵

“Yes.”

“You could just have people stop calling you Maria. There is no need for a big change.”

“No, this is what I want.”²⁶

Sexual orientation and gender are two of the “big eight” social identifiers which should be easy to share with community members without receiving judgment.²⁷ I identify as a gender non-conforming pansexual. Pansexuality, or omnisexuality, is the sexual, romantic or emotional attraction towards people regardless of their sex or gender identity. Gender nonconformity refers to a state in which a person has physical and behavioral characteristics that do not correspond with those associated with a person’s sex. I believe that sexual orientation and gender can be determined by the acceptance and education in a social setting and educational environments. I grew up in a school environment where we were educated on sexuality and gender preference. Students were more conscious about the comments that they made, if someone did make a joke about a kid being gay, more than half of the people around that person would say something in response. I have always felt like my sexuality was the only thing that other kids at school

²⁴ This was really nice for me because people would come up to me and ask me about it. They would tell me to please correct them if they mess up my pronouns and that they would try hard to change their vocabulary. I even received an encouraging and sweet text from someone.

²⁵ I know this was not supposed to come out the way it did. It was supposed to come out from a place of love and care. We talked about this, I was able to understand where they were coming from. After this happened, I did question myself for longer and I was still convinced that this is what I wanted. I did not take this well the first time but I start to understand why they reacted the way they did.

²⁶ There was a lot more to that conversation but I am glad that we were able to discuss what had happened. I honestly felt like I would be able to feel comfortable around them again but I think that our friendship meant more to me.

²⁷ People should act without judgement when it comes to discussing the identity of someone. It is not their place to judge, it just isn’t.

accepted about me and would not make fun of. It was something we were taught to accept and welcome, it was the one thing I felt safe about.

Both gender and sexuality could be thought of as existing along a spectrum, or perhaps two separate but intimately related spectra.²⁸ The idea of gender fluidity suggests that gender is not fixed by biology, but shifts according to social, cultural, and individual preference. Studies on gender and the media have addressed how gender difference is coded in cultural representations: media products for and about boys tend to emphasize activity and bravery, whereas those for girls tend to emphasize kindness and beauty.²⁹ Gender structures our lives in fundamental ways impacting everything from the activities we are encouraged to enjoy and the behaviors we are expected to display as children, to the subjects we study as young people, to the occupation we enter and responsibilities we undertake as adults. It is also reinforced by institutions, parents, marketing, television shows, and movies.³⁰ We are encouraged to do things based on the gender that we express, categorizing the most basic of activities into the two sexes. Engraving this behavior into the brain of children is damaging due to the fact that if they do start to act differently or express interest in activities that are not considered of their own gender, they feel remorse and shame. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, it is often termed as “minority stress” as the great differences in the LGBT community stem from a variety of factors including social stigma, discrimination, prejudice, denial of civil and human rights, abuse, harassment, victimization, social exclusion, and family rejection.

IV. WHY DOES MY FAMILY EVEN AFFECT THIS PART OF ME? WHO CARES, RIGHT?

My relationship with my family is unconventional, there is a role-reversal; I take care of them and of family affairs. My personal life has never been a public topic of conversation with them and vice versa. It was always hard getting to know more about my parents because personal information came with time. The problem is not knowing the people who raised you well. You know them, but do you really *know* them? Don't show your feelings; don't be weak. Not being able to express feelings while being a child is hard; bottled up feelings are never good but are always seen as a sign of weakness.³¹ Not being able to share who I am is due to the fear I experience whenever I come close to it. There are too many emotions that I would not want to share. Growing up in Mexican culture, there are enforced gender roles; women belong in the

²⁸ I believe everyone is on a spectrum and everyone is on it. Sexuality and gender are things that are related, therefore, it would be hard to believe it that it is not on a scale.

²⁹ This sucks because it complicates everything. You can't catch a little boy with a Barbie doll because people think he's fragile or too feminine. You can't catch a little girl with a truck because God forbid she is going to do something more in her life than play with makeup.

³⁰ Television shows and movies have stereotypical gender roles which are shown to children.

³¹ Don't cry unless people make you cry. Feelings should not make you feel so overwhelmed. It's a weird cultural thing which feels good to know that I am not the only one to feel this way but still sucks!

kitchen and men bring home the money.³² Acting outside of these roles usually resulted in uncalled for comments from my dad. He will joke about a guy walking down the street because he is wearing a more feminine outfit. “God, if I had a son like that, I would disown him.” Cutting my hair shorter than considered ladylike was always problematic, you do not want to look like a boy. Look like the sex you were assigned at birth seems to be their motto. Sometimes, just sometimes, I have hope. My dad will ask me if I have a boyfriend and when I respond, “no,” he will continue on to a girlfriend. This has been going on for years and sometimes I question if he already knows. I have never felt comfortable with the idea of coming out. I joke that it will never happen but moments like those make me say to myself, “Maybe it won’t be so bad.”

My mom stormed back to the church with me, she talked to the teacher about what had happened. I had told my mom that they were making assumptions, it was not my time to tell her yet. As my mom talked, my brain kept telling me I had done the right thing. My mom had told the teacher that we should not be ones to judge those who choose that lifestyle. She had said it in a voice that made me worry, it was not genuine. The teacher agreed with my mom but kept looking at me as if she were worried about who I was going to become.

When I was in eighth grade, after the Sunday class incident had happened and after I had realized that I was not straight, I told my mom that I was bisexual.³³ I had been debating with myself in the shower, telling myself not to do it. Telling myself that she would not see me the same or that she would not take me seriously. I wasn’t going to tell her but after I had gotten dressed, I felt a notion of guilt because I never kept things from my mom.³⁴ I stormed out of my room while my mom was watching her telenovelas³⁵ and just blurted out “I’m bisexual.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Like I like both guys and girls.”

“Oh my god. It was that blonde girl that you hang out with all the time. María, I don’t think you’re the type of kid to be gay.”

“Yeah, I do like her. And I don’t know mom, that’s how I feel, okay?”

“You’re too young to know how you feel and too young to know anything about who you are.”

“Fine, whatever. You’re right, I guess.”³⁶

I sat next to my mom on the couch, not saying a word. No one said a word for a while and when we did start talking again, it felt like that conversation had never happened.

³² This was always bullshit in my mind, ever since I was little I questioned the way I was raised. I get massive headaches to this day because of it.

³³ I was dumb, very dumb.

³⁴ It got a lot easier to hide this part of my identity after this. I stopped having the notion of guilt for a while until I came to Oxbow because it felt like I was not gone and she still did not know who I was.

³⁵ It was already not a smart idea to initiate this conversation but to do it while my mother was watching her Spanish soap operas was another problem. It was like I was interrupting her sacred time. I felt like I was walking late to mass and everyone turned their heads to see who it was, judging them silently but harshly.

³⁶ The conversation happened in Spanish, obviously, which means that it was a lot more emotional. The Spanish language is very dramatic and saying a sentence could have so much meaning. It was really weird, I don’t want to do that again.

V. CONCLUSION: IT'S NOT MY TIME YET...

Maybe when I am in college and my dad brings up his famous “Do you have a boyfriend?” line, I will be able to tell him that dating a guy is not my only option. Maybe, I’ll be able to tell him that I have a girlfriend. Maybe I will be able to tell my mom, without having the fear of my mom telling that it is not who I am. I hope that one day, I will be able to live without hiding any part of who I am; that I will be able to freely speak without censoring my speech. Not being able to be completely true to oneself is damaging, hiding secrets from others can damage relationship as it seems like there is not a complete sense of trust. Running from who I am, questioning who I am is not the way I want to live but it is the way that I choose to because I fear that I will not be accepted. I am fine with not telling my parents as of now, it is not my time. It is not their time to know but the time will come sooner than later, hopefully, they will be proud that I was able to tell them and they will see me the same.

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