Changing the Scripts: How Non-Binary and Transgender Writers Rely on Dominant Discourses in the Production of Coming-Out Stories

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Abstract
In this article, I analyze gay, lesbian and transgender authors’ use of the prevailing model of the “coming-out story” and its problematic implications. I begin by arguing that coming-out stories in gay and lesbian autobiographies have been restrained by their relationship to hegemonic heterosexual discourse, which has led to the oversimplification and structural limitation of coming-out narratives so as to adjust them to straight society’s expectations. I show how the coming-out-story paradigm (which always includes a protagonist’s inner knowledge of their true sexual identity from a young age and their adherence to this truth throughout processual recounting of life experiences) hinders gay and lesbian writers’ attempts to identify their sexualities publicly while also providing almost no space for trans narratives. The result is a plethora of ubiquitous, “homonormative” (Cohler 2007) gay and lesbian narratives, contrived Trans stories forced into the gay and lesbian model which makes Trans sexualities invisible (instead of developing out of their own community and identities; Lal Zimman 2009; Vasvari 2006), and the rejection of all narratives which do not follow that problematic autobiographical formula. Thus, I propose that the naturalized structure of the coming-out story is both unforgiving to the author and the only formula that is culturally accepted at this moment in time. The terms of autobiographical writing, the influence of hegemonic discourse, and lack of new cultural scripts have produced a story-telling framework that limits both non-binary and transgender authors in producing an honest discourse around their identity.

Keywords
Coming-out, Narrative, Identity, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender.

One of stories’ greatest powers is their ability to unify—both to bring together disparate people into a community and to solidify perceptions and worldviews. As such, stories “affect our norms, who we think of as insiders and outsiders, who is deserving and undeserving, and why our world looks the way it does” (Saltemarshe 2018). One of the ways stories unite is through the standardization of narrative structure, vocabulary, and themes, though homogenization can trap storytellers into conventionalized, reductive, and inauthentic narratives. In this same way, life stories preserved in written autobiographies help forge cultural frameworks that can, in turn, legitimize gender ideologies and their attendant patterns of segregation and stigmatization. As portrayed in the gendered narratives of heterosexual courtship, men and women often perform their genders discursively by relying on a dominant, androcentric script built out of a sexist framework (Silberstein 1998).

Although the visibility afforded non-binary individuals as they gain acceptance in greater society gives them a chance to generate new narrative scripts, I argue that their stories are often governed by the rules of the dominant discourse. These stories, called coming-out stories, are quintessential narratives told by gay, lesbian, and trans individuals. In particular, I claim that the coming-out story
has become conventionalized and simplified through its dialectical relationship to dominant cultural discourses in the form of heterosexual autobiographies. The problems of this standardization are compounded for transgender authors because they are publicly identifying with a gender identity rather than a sexual identity, and are unable to rely on dominant gay and lesbian narratives. I rely on queer anthropology and non-binary and trans narratives to question existing coming-out stories' narrative models and explain how Western society's autobiographical structures shape the production of (what aim to be) subversive narratives.

RELIANCE ON HETERO-NORMATIVE SCRIPTS

Stories which transgress the conventionalized gay and lesbian autobiography genre help us identify what, exactly, the genre's conventions are. For example, Margaretta Jolly (2001) dissects how the writing of queer lives is ill-received when authors do not follow normative scripts. Jolly (2001) argues that conventional coming-out stories rely on a standard "language of belonging," which autobiographies like Jan Clausen's "Apples and Oranges: My Journey Through Sexual Identity" prove is impersonal and insufficient. Likewise, identifying publicly with one sexuality gives authors cultural capital, as this is more valued by (and intelligible to) mainstream heterosexual order than other varying identities. Coming-out stories reveal that cultural acceptance is limited to this "either-or sexuality model" even within homosexual communities (Jolly 2001). For instance, Clausen diverged from this trope by first coming out as lesbian and then coming out again as heterosexual when she married a man. She lost credibility and was "exiled" from the lesbian community, who expected her lesbian identity to be fixed rather than relative. In this sense, Clausen's fluidity rejects the coming-out-story convention of absolute "conversion" and "revelation" (in other words, choosing to live in accordance with a truth the author has always known) common across male and female homosexual autobiographies. Without inclusive language to construct new narratives, writers are compelled to rely on constrictive, pre-existing scripts. Thus, Jolly questions if the coming-out story still has a purpose or if it is too "culturally and politically specific" to help gay and lesbian autobiographers facilitate diverse and fulfilling communities through the genre of written sexual lives (Jolly 2001).

The writing of gay men similarly reveals how non-binary writers rely on the language and logic of previous authors while they attempt to construct non-normative identities and communities. In "Writing Gay Desire," Bertram Cohler (2007) muses about whether the growing social acceptance of gay men has frozen the writing of gay life into a particular pattern that limits future generations. He sees the notion of "being gay" as a structured concept produced by "wider discursive forces" and laments the inability of gay men to share particular experiences that do not align with larger understandings of what it means to be gay. In his review of Cohler's book, Mark McLelland (2008) draws on "will to institutionality," a concept coined by Roderick Ferguson, to expose gay autobiographers' fixation on having their relationships "normalized, institutionalized, and bureaucratized" in the same manner as their heterosexual counterparts. McLelland provocatively argues that gay male autobiographers' reliance on dominant, heteronormative life-story discourses has created a "homonormative" narrative. I contend that authors attempting to subvert this hegemonic homonormative discourse (that sexuality is an innate aspect of identity) are often reduced to another conventionalized script. While these life stories help a community connect discursively, they also produce a particular kind of accepted homosexuality that is not a universally shared experience. Consequently, when newer generations of gay writers gain access to platforms to tell their stories, they may attempt to construct their identities and narratives in opposition to a hegemonic ideal — but they will still be stuck using formulaic cultural scripts.

The reproduction of easily digestible, non-binary autobiographies results in censoring or silencing many gay and lesbian writers. For example, heterosexuality belongs to a culturally unmarked category. So, in heterosexual women's autobiographies, sexuality is unnamed as it is assumed. While the coming-out story is essential to the construction
and negotiation of lesbian identity, lesbian autobiography becomes problematic when it is produced in frameworks of heterosexuality that deem lesbian women as deviant from the norm. Lesbian women's subversive sexuality must be named, which makes other details of their autobiography invisible outside of this uniform (sexual) difference from the natural, heterosexual woman. This invisibility is precisely what Julia Watson seeks to define as the "unspeakable;" in other words, the oppression of women's discourse when not presented in the framework of hegemonic heterosexual language (1998).

Women's desire lies within the realm of the unspeakable in women's narratives. Stifling discussion of desire directly correlates to the "silencing of sexuality" that occurs in cultures which lack technical language to name genital organs or sexual violence, or which lack proper forums to speak about these issues (Vasvari 2006). In Western culture, women are lexically degraded by the language of the patriarchy, which reduces the differences between women and their desires into one heterosexual norm versus the deviants. As a result, the structured coming-out-story frame for lesbian autobiography "institutionalizes lesbian difference" (Watson 1998, 213). This institutionalization is another way that the genre of the coming-out story, as the basis for gay and lesbian autobiography, reinforces conventions that limit the construction of gay and lesbian identities. Much like Jolly, Watson sees lesbian authors who use fixed terms for expressing a "homogenous, repressive past" and "discovery of lesbian desire" as taking part in limiting the structure of coming-out narratives. I propose here – with supportive data from Katherine Wood (1997) – that there are discrepancies between the ways lesbian speakers view coming out as an ongoing process and the model which forces them to write about lesbian identity in a more fixed way.

In non-binary writers' narrations, protagonists use present tense to speak about coming-out experiences, indicating that coming-out is not a single event that occurred at a given moment in the past. This type of syntactic flexibility is not afforded to lesbian authors staying within the confines of the autobiographic genre. In addition to authors' contributions to the "norms of autobiography," readers often contribute to the understanding of lesbian autobiography as a rigid genre (Watson 1998). Speaking to this, Biddy Martin proposes that readers should see lesbian texts as a "negotiation around identity and difference" rather than as "a totalizing self-identification" (1998). Readers and writers of lesbian texts must upheave the orthodox constrictions placed on the genre of autobiography by creating new cultural narratives which contribute to the cognitive framework of society. Then, different members of the LGBTQ community will view the coming-out story as less of a homogenized practice, and a counterscript or new model of autobiographical writing might "break silence" to question "dominant structures of meaning" (Watson 1998).

PROGRESSIVE MODELS OF TRANSGENDER NARRATIVES

Notwithstanding the linguistic similarities between gay, lesbian, and transgender narratives, transgender authors have the most potential to challenge the model of the coming-out story by not orienting to the norms that gay and lesbian stories have placed on revealing identity. While Lal Zimman (2009) reminds us that there are "community-specific ways" to go about narrating coming-out stories, I argue that all coming-out stories are placed in opposition to the hegemonic norms in society and that authors negotiate subversive identities through autobiography. A salient theme in coming-out stories is "claiming an invisible identity" – either a sexual identity for gay and lesbian authors or a gender identity for trans authors (ibid). Yet trans writers have the option of coming out either before or after changing their gender roles. In this case, trans narratives lack the processuality of gay and lesbian coming out stories. Rather, they can "disclose" their former gender after assuming a new gender identity, thereby telling a "transgender history," or they may choose to "declare" the gender they identify with before performing that identity (ibid). These transgender writers' lexical distinctions correlate to the fact that they live in the "opposite gender assigned to them at birth" (ibid, 57). This distinction means that trans narratives are unique in
the sense that they do not often contain the same developmental timeline that is characteristic of gay and lesbian coming-out stories despite being constructed in relation to heteronormative life stories.

The distinct ability of trans writers to ‘disclose’ or ‘declare’ a gender identity is limited by society’s views on the inherent nature of gender as biological rather than a social construct. Zimman describes the result of a society fixated on the hegemonic readings of coming-out narratives and stigmatized identities:

Non-transgender people typically assign primacy to a person’s assigned gender role and upon discovering a person’s transgender status will often conclude that the individual is ‘really’ a woman, for example, even if they may look like and identify as a man. As a result of this schism, disclosing a transgender past may have the effect of undermining what the speaker sees as their true identity rather than illuminating it (ibid, 56).

In this case, the coming-out story is relatively ineffective at negotiating and constructing a strong sense of identity in opposition to the powerful cultural frameworks at play. This has a silencing effect on transgender individuals who seek community and solidarity through the genre of the coming-out story. This silencing demands that the coming-out story be “reconceptualized… to account for the entire range of coming out experiences of members of the LGBT population” (ibid, 55).

Language is the method by which counter-scripts to the hegemonic norm can be generated: “consciously liberating discourse” is a powerful tool to combat hegemonic ideologies (Vasvári 2006). For example, when transsexual speakers debase dominant gender ideologies using creative linguistic practices, the larger discourse surrounding their identities begins to change as well. Zimman and Hall’s (2015) research on the discourses of female-to-male transgender speakers shows how the bricoleur of stigmatized groups fulfills community needs first through new language practices. A linguistic arsenal full of words like “bonus hole,” or “front hole,” which denote the vagina on transsexual men, also works to dismantle the “semantic link” between genitals and gender (Zimman & Hall 2015). This “subversive reshaping of genital terms” is effective in fashioning non-binary identities by vernacularly altering established hegemonic genders. Transsexual men legitimize their discourse through a “blurring of the line between clitorises and penises” to collocate female and male genital terminology with the “opposite” gendered bodies (Zimman & Hall 2015). The production of these heterodox discourses has the power to develop a larger consciousness about the gender ideologies at play in our society.

**STORING TO BETTER DEFINE REALITY**

Challenging the integrity of current coming-out story models is part and parcel to recognizing the need for anthropological and linguistic inquiry into queer lives. Western society does not provide space for non-binary or trans people to build stories that fall outside of homogenized categories, and it silences those who try. While the production of non-binary and trans life stories helps writers gain visibility in mainstream society, their reliance on structured narratives hinders their ability to negotiate an honest public identity. New forms of online media (such as Twitter) introduce an alternative, condensed version of the coming-out story and help to move away from the conventional gay and lesbian narratives (Karlan 2014). Coming-out stories produced outside hegemonic models provide future writers with inclusive language they can use to write their own stories more freely. An emphasis on community-specific needs is central to the creation of new cultural scripts as trans writers linguistically assert their identities in creative ways while moving away from dependence on the writing parameters of gay and lesbian life. Queer anthropology and studies of autobiography also need to be discussed and thought about in an intersectional manner. Overall, in order for the genre of the coming-out story to be an effective means of constructing identities, the hegemonic cultural frameworks that limit its structure must shift to include the counter-scripts that already exist and continue to arise.
WORKS CITED


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