

Identity: the fact of being who or what a person or thing is.

What creates an individual's identity? Through meticulous studies in genealogy and psychology, scientists have tried their best to answer this question. One's identity is shaped by the surrounding environment and events in a person's life.

This installation explores "identity" through film photography. I manipulated each print by adjusting contrast, size, exposure time, and external printing techniques. The photos include places I grew up in, along with a series of self-portraits. The photos are installed as a "floating timeline." As the viewer moves through the installation, they are invited to decipher the evolution from blurry, dark, and indistinguishable images to clear, contrasted, and eventually colored. This evolution represents the journey to finding one's identity and learning to become comfortable within oneself.

Understanding identity helps us understand who we are and how to become comfortable with ourselves. Identity allows us to create connections with others. My artwork is a commentary on how identity changes by the places and people we are surrounded by. By discovering our own unique identity, we aid in creating a more compassionate society.

Amanda

It's not all black and white

Amanda



The first time I came out to someone was at a two week leadership camp in rural Wisconsin. The whole camp had a huge hookup culture-- a culture that was not well received by the counselors and adults; they tried their best to keep boys and girls either separate or under explicit supervision. Kids would often sneak off to fraternize in hidden places around camp; one friend from this camp came up to me after two pairs had been brought back from their hiding spots and said, "I was just thinking, since I'm bi, how easy it would be for two girls to go and hook up right now," to which I immediately replied, "oh cool I'm bi too." After saying this I took a sharp deep breath as I realized that I had just come out to someone for the first time. I had kept to myself for two years that I was bisexual simply because I was afraid that I wasn't allowed to be bi, that I should have known since I was little if it was real. I saw people post "coming out" videos on youtube where they would say "all my crushes were on girls, since I was very young, even in kindergarten. I know that I am gay." I, on the other hand, was not as sure. How could I know that I wasn't straight if I never kissed a girl or fell in love with a girl? At that leadership camp it was so quick and natural that I didn't even have to think about it, and I finally felt comfortable and validated in calling myself bisexual.

In this paper I will explore my own sexual identity and the influence society has on it by examining both the history and study of sexuality and my own personal experience with building an identity. Creating a sexual identity comes from the influences that surround us; the house that one is raised in, how liberal or conservative their town is, and the state of society as a whole both at the national and international levels as we grow up. *Heteronormativity*¹ has been a huge part of human culture for centuries, most likely due to ideas stemming from religion. From the 1800's (the time that sex studies began), to the present, Christianity has been the dominant religion in America and many European countries that lead this movement:

Mark 10:6-9 - *But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*

Although this verse is not explicitly anti-gay, it implies that god has a specific intention for women and man to be together. This creates a society that normalizes straight relationships and alienates any other relationship as abnormal, hence creating a barrier that enables true acceptance of all sexualities.

These ideas of straight being “normal” are not only accepted, but also further validated by the beginning of sexology² and the study of sex. One early sexologist, Robert von Krafft Ebbing, studied sex in the late 1800's³ and details his findings in the book *Psychopathia Sexualis*. In his introduction he states, “Individuals of the opposite sexes feel themselves drawn toward each other by mental and physical qualities, and show love for each other only.” He further explains how the woman is an object that the man strives for in an advanced society, and that this is a construct that shows a forward movement evolutionarily. Von Krafft Ebbing, seeing his own German culture as higher and greater than those of the East and Middle East, claiming that only lesser civilizations treat the woman as a sexual object. He states that in Christianity, the woman is raised to a social equality with the man, which “elevates the bond of love between man and woman to a religio-moral institution. The fact that in higher civilization human love must be monogamous and rest on a lasting contract was thus recognized.” Although the study of sex and sexuality at the time of von Krafft Ebbing was taboo and ahead of its time, early leaders of the study of sexology focused simply on relationships that included one male and one female and the respective sexual relationships. This narrow focus of study alienated the underground gay communities of the time and further instilled the idea that the only normal relationship is straight and any other relationship is ungodly and unnatural. Von Krafft Ebbing writes, “With opportunity for the natural satisfaction of the sexual instinct, every expression of it that does not correspond with the purpose of nature-- *i.e.* propagation-- must be regarded as perverse.” This fed the culture of homophobia and played a role in the creation of conversion therapy.

Norman Domeier, professor of contemporary history at the University of Vienna, released his book *The Eulenburg Affair* in 2015. The book outlines the events of the Harden-Eulenburg affair, an affair in the early 1900's in Germany, shortly before WWI, which centred on journalist Maximilian Harden's accusations of homosexual conduct between Philipp, Prince

¹ of, relating to, or based on the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality

² the study of sex or of the interaction of the sexes especially among human beings

³ At this time there had been very little attention toward sex studies, making any attention to this field ahead of its time.

of Eulenburg-Hertefeld, and General Kuno, Graf von Moltke, and Magnus Hirschfeld⁴, an early sexologist who testified against Moltke in the trial. Domeier states that “The term ‘homosexual’ was introduced into public discourse for the first time in the Eulenburg scandal, as was the debate over whether one was ‘born’ or ‘degenerated’ into homosexuality.” This shows the beginnings of homosexuality being introduced into mainstream society, but this did not mean that it would entail equal rights. Hirschfeld’s testimony from the trial states, “Homosexual men are usually characterized by a higher sensibility and impressibility... emotions dominate their life, a strong artistic sense... combined with all kinds of feminine affinities and passions, in the good and bad sense of the word. This blend does not make the homosexual inferior – he is not like the heterosexual – but he is of the same value... Homosexual love, as proven by this case, can be as pure as normal love.” Although it highly stereotypes the gay man, Hirschfeld attempts to make a case for acceptance in mainstream culture of homosexuality. Later in the trials, the prosecutor threatened to reveal Hirschfeld as a homosexual to the public, so he left behind his hopes of using the trial to fight for gay rights and joined other sexologists who claimed that Moltke’s wife’s testimony, “was tainted by ‘physical and psychological hysteria’ and therefore was completely worthless. Together they declared that Count Kuno Moltke had a perfectly normal sexual orientation, and that his honor was ‘spotlessly clean’.” The trial, in the end, brought about ideas from sexologists about homosexuality but did not lead to actual change in tolerance. Domeier concludes, “Homosexual self-liberation failed. Homophobia was considered a moral value – even more important than old-fashioned chastity, as long as heterosexual masculinity was in doubt... The Eulenburg affair, still seen as the homosexuality scandal of the twentieth-century, did not change moral notions of homosexuality but instead confirmed homophobia.”

Although I was finally comfortable with myself, the community that I grew up in did not lend itself well to me coming out at home or a school. The lack of education and understanding of the LGBTQ+ community in my town created an inner conflict between the part of me that knows and loves my identity, and the part that feels the need to hide inside of someone with who is straight, binary, and conforming to the lifestyle that everyone in my town is expected to have. Throughout high school I was in multiple straight-passing relationships, keeping my sexuality even from my partners at the time. It wasn’t until shortly before coming to Oxbow that I looked more deeply at my sexual identity, further than just aspects determined by gender. I looked closer at different aspects of sexuality and learned about the ace spectrum⁵. I started to identify myself as biromantic demisexual⁶.

Another early sexologist was able to see better into the issues of creating labels and divides among people’s sexualities. Henry Havelock Ellis studied sexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality in his writing *Sexual Inversion*, published in Germany in 1896. Ellis admits that homosexuality can be a natural feeling, but only in circumstances where society has placed boundaries on a person where they only have access to physical contact with members of their

⁴ often know as the “einstein of sex”

⁵ Colloquial abbreviation of “asexual”. Often used to refer to asexual people in a similar manner as “gay” or “straight” are used to refer to homosexual or heterosexual people. Ace also includes gray-asexual and demisexual people.

⁶ a person who is romantically attracted to two or more genders, but will only feel sexual attraction when a deep bond is formed between them and their partner

own sex. For example, prisoners would likely participate in homosexual acts because they are separated by gender. When husbands go off to war, women of the family take interest in their other female neighbors since they had no man left in their lives. Ellis also discusses the idea of bisexuality in this work. He states that there are three divisions of sexuality (gay, straight, and bi) and that “this elementary classification seems however of no great practical use. The bisexual group is found to introduce uncertainty and doubt [about who truly belongs in which group].” The book continues to describe that some members of the homosexual group identified sexual attraction in the past for those of the opposite sex, and vice versa for the heterosexual group, so this classification of the three groups is “a useful superficial division, [but] scarcely a scientific classification.” He later even states, “It seemed best to me to attempt no classification at all.” This is the first real recognition of sexual fluidity, but the ideas of the era created a distancing of the scientist from recognizing the truths of classifying sexuality.

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, explains her ideas on fluidity and the idea of “coming out” in her writing *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, released in the early 1990’s. She begins by stating, “Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.” Butler feels that identifying herself as a “lesbian” is both a hindrance to ending homophobia as well as a helpful tool. By using labels, members of LGBT+ communities can fight for equality by stating to those outside of the community that homosexuality is present and valid, and the people in this community deserve equal rights. However, she believes that in the long run these labels will inhibit full rights; she states, “To install myself within the terms of an identity category would be to turn against the sexuality that the category purports to describe; and this might be true for any identity category which seeks to control the very eroticism that it claims to describe and authorize, much less ‘liberate...’ If I claim to be a lesbian, I ‘come out’ to a new and different ‘closet.’” Gaining rights in a way that utilizes specific terminology can be harmful to members of the LGBT community that do not necessarily fit under the specific identities to which rights have been granted⁷. Butler expands these ideas to discuss the idea of ‘coming out.’ She asks the reader, “Is the ‘subject’ who is ‘out’ free of its subjection and finally in the clear? Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivities the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once ‘outness’ is claimed?” Butler sees *outness* as another societal boundary that restrains one’s ability to truly express themselves. In her perfect world, people would not need to be “out”, but simply to act upon any feelings that they have and others would just accept this as “normal.” This world that Butler imagines is one that can only be created if heteronormative culture is replaced with an all-accepting culture. Gay rights are not enough; it is a change of attitude that is necessary to bring about true equality for members of the LGBT community.

During my time at the Oxbow School I am finally in a community where I feel comfortable being “out” and referring to myself as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I have learned so much about the community and the fluidity and adaptability of gender and sexuality, as well as the importance of being in a place where I can experience and take part in a community who has similar feelings and values about sexuality as my own. I have decided during my time here to begin identifying simply as queer; over time I have learned new ideas about myself and to express how sexuality is constantly changing it is easier to just let

⁷ For example, current gay rights in America continue to, for the most part, exclude trans rights

myself feel free to take part in any relationships that feel right in the moment. In a way I feel that labels within the queer community⁸ can restrict this. I once thought that the only way to build an identity was to figure out exactly who I am, but allowing myself to grow and change creates an identity that can follow me through my life.

The fact that sex studies revealed and chastised the gay community created a homophobic culture, but it was also a large contributor in bringing forward gay rights movements. Gayle Rubin, an American cultural anthropologist best known as an activist and theorist of sex and gender politics, brings up these efforts in her 1984 essay *Thinking Sex*. She explains, “an explosion of exciting scholarship and political writing about sex has been generated in... the 1950s; the early gay rights movement began and prospered while the bars were being raided and anti-gay laws were being passed.” When sex was brought out to the public, as something to be talked about, no longer a taboo, the gay community suffered from hate and discrimination for being different than the expected or the “norm.” However, this created a community among gay people in which there was a necessity to band together in order to fight this discrimination-- an idea that still holds today and is used to facilitate gay rights around the world. Rubin writes,

Immigration policy still prohibits the admission of homosexuals into the United States. Military regulations bar homosexuals from serving in the armed forces. The fact that gay people cannot legally marry means that they cannot enjoy the same legal rights as heterosexuals in many matters, including inheritance, taxation, protection from testimony in court, and the acquisition of citizenship for foreign partners. These are but a few of the ways that the state reflects and maintains the social relations of sexuality... The repression of the 1950s was in part a backlash to the expansion of sexual communities and possibilities which took place during World War II. During the 1950s, gay rights organizations were established, the Kinsey reports⁹ were published, and lesbian literature flourished. The 1950s were a formative as well as a repressive era.

In addition to the advancements in the movement, in 1951, The Mattachine Society¹⁰ was formed; in 1962, Illinois becomes the first U.S. state to decriminalize homosexual acts; in 1966, the National Transsexual Counseling Unit¹¹ was established in San Francisco; in 1969, the Stonewall riots¹² created widespread protest for equal rights and acceptance; and in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removes homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders. These movements, sparked by the aggressive oppression of gay people in the 50’s, pushed LGBT rights forward greatly from where they started.

On June 26, 2015 the Supreme Court ruled to legalize same-sex marriage. This day was a huge success for the LGBT community, but in many ways there is still a lot to fight for. The

⁸ referring to earlier when I specifically identified as bisexual or biromantic demisexual

⁹ The Kinsey Reports are two books on human sexual behavior: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, written by Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy and others and published by Saunders.

¹⁰ the first national gay rights organization

¹¹ the first trans rights organization

¹² Patrons of a gay bar in New York's Greenwich Village, the Stonewall Inn, fight back during a police raid on June 27, sparking three days of riots.

LGBT community has continuously been fighting against discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations. On May 13, 2016, President Obama weighed in on the "toilet wars"—legislation being hashed out in some states about which bathrooms transgender people have the right to use—with the guidelines: students may use bathrooms according to their self-identified gender. Although these rights are more than what existed in the past, we still live in a *heteronormative* culture where being queer is seen as abnormal, coming out is seen as a necessary conversation, and many feel the need to hide their sexual identity from the world in order to feel safe. Homophobia is still present in America, and even more around the world where being gay is still crime. The existence of Gay conversion therapy remains and is legal in most states. I find that it is important now more than ever to embrace the people that have helped me discover so much about myself, love, and community and stand together with my community to make sure that my rights are not prohibited by social constructs, religion, and bias.

*I fear to return to the world outside of Oxbow where I will face prejudice, homophobia, and a world where gender and sexuality are assumed based on how I dress and the length of my hair. I am afraid that I will have to fight not only for more rights as a member of the queer community, but also to keep the rights I already have.*¹³

¹³ Though recently gay rights have greatly increased, there is a chance that these rights will be repealed due to the outcome of the recent presidential election. The LGBT+ community in America is very lucky compared to some parts of the world, in which any act on gay feelings can get people imprisoned, and sometimes executed, however in some states conversion therapy on minors is still legal, and Vice President elect Pence is a supporter of these “techniques” that are harmful to the mental health and well being of many young Americans. Currently only five states and D.C. have banned conversion therapy for minors.

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