

To Stay In and Be Queer: Redefining Western Queerness and Conceptions of Coming Out in *The Half of It*

Western interpretations of queerness in media have primarily centred the conversation of what it means to be queer around the conception that to be universally acknowledged as ‘queer’, one must be ‘out’ and ‘queer’, simultaneously. The queer identity, which for centuries has existed as a subject commonly associated with secrecy, has become an abstraction that is more often than not publicised within the contemporary. This ideology is especially prevalent within the thematic elements of modern day coming-of-age works of fiction. However, Alice Wu’s 2020 coming-of-age drama, *The Half of It*, takes this concept of ‘outness’ and reforms it in a way that challenges the standard expectations of queerness. The film follows seventeen year old Ellie Chu, a Chinese-American lesbian who explores the boundaries of romance, friendship, and belonging through the complexities of her relationships presented throughout the film. This narrative forces audiences to consider moments of seclusion, isolation, and inwardness as what crafts experiences of queerness that are far more common than we are led to believe. Wu’s film offers a perspective which affirms definitions of queerness that do not require the concept of ‘outness’, which is demonstrated throughout the film’s narrative and moments of intimacy and seclusion between Ellie, her love interest Aster Flores, and her quickly formed friendship with Paul Munsy. In this essay, I plan to analyse the film’s protagonist and the dynamics of her relationships with the other characters in both queerplatonic and queerromantic contexts in order to demonstrate how the existence of experiencing queerness is not dependent on the concept of outing or proclaiming oneself as queer. By calling attention to the intimacies of queer experiences lived by Ellie, as a racialized, queer individual, the film presents a challenge to white

Western readings of queer relations through the refusal to engage with ‘outness’ as a staple of queer staging and through the enactments of ‘staying in’ in replacement of ‘coming out’.

In the context of acceptance, expression, and movement, there is an emphasis on visibility in regards to how queerness is understood. Visibility offers moulds for queerness to be arranged through similar representations that fall under the category of ‘different’ or ‘othered.’ How we define ‘queer’ becomes centred around an awareness, articulation, and self-expression of ‘queerness’ that must ‘come out’ to others. Exiting one’s shadow of invisibility and entering into a space of visibility has standardised how the concept of queerness in identity has become synonymous with the concept of coming out in action. In order to be recognised as queer, one must perform the act of announcing their queerness externally or ‘outwardly’. If they fail to do so, they are not necessarily labelled under the definition of heterosexual, but they are not acknowledged as queer either. I find this expectation of showcasing one’s queerness to be an abstraction of expression that is most commonly expected within Western spaces. The very notion of what it means to move and exist throughout the world as queer means to be out and queer is a highly Westernised understanding for how individual queerness is defined. Interestingly, the attention of putting one’s queerness on display neglects the experience of coming to terms with or navigating these experiences of difference on the individual doing the experiencing. Rarely depictions of the queer experience consider the moments of independent pondering, processing, conceding, or claiming, especially if those claiming queerness as identity are racialized, undocumented, or immigrants, respectfully.

My use of terms such as ‘staying in’, ‘inward’, and ‘inwardness’, which are frequently used to within Summer Kim Lee’s essay, “Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality” is done so to describe the varying degrees for how adolescent social

behaviour is comprehended. Lee defines the act of staying in as rearranging “what constitutes the social and, in so doing, critiques the compulsory sociability and relatability demanded of minoritarian subjects to go out, come out, and be out” (Lee 29). Throughout her article, Lee describes an almost cathartic comprehension of asociality through her arguments against the notion that to be alone and antisocial is synonymous with the passivity of ‘missing out.’. Instead, Lee presents an alternative and perceives moments of voluntary exclusion as the activity of choosing to ‘stay in.’ Lee goes on to draw connections to how the act of ‘staying in’ relates to racialized and queer experiences, particularly by Western Asian-Americans in majority white Western spaces. She articulates that the act of staying in or “turning inward” (Lee 28) can be as simple as staying home when the outdoors call for human interaction or the active decision to set firm boundaries between oneself and a person they love. From here on, when I use terms such as ‘staying in’, ‘stay in’, ‘outward’, ‘outwardness’, ‘inward’, or ‘inwardness’, I am referencing Lee’s definitions of asociality. In using these terms, I hope to present an opposition between conceptions of ‘coming out’ and ‘staying in’ by proposing that there is an inconspicuous binary in defining queerness through the synonymisation of ‘queer’ and ‘coming out’. In my analysis of Wu’s film, I distinguish opposition between how racialized Western queerness is read and articulated in contrast to white Western queerness. By looking at a couple of white queer films released around the same time as *The Half of It*, I inspect the differences in how queerness is engaged with by white, Western protagonists as an experience that requires or centres conceptions of outwardness.

For instance, Greg Berlanti’s 2018 queer romantic comedy, *Love, Simon*, is an adaptation of a popular young adult novel *Simon vs The Homosapien Agenda*, which follows the story of titular character, Simon Spier, as he navigates the difficulties of adolescence and queerness

during his junior year of highschool. The film's narrative is not focused on Simon's journey to accepting his own queerness, as he starts off the film with the understanding and accepting that he is gay, but instead showcases how he comes to terms with others in his life accepting and conforming to his existence as the Simon they already know with the label 'gay' included in his identity. In the process of his journey, he is unfortunately outed and almost robbed of what is potentially his only chance at experiencing a highschool romance. A majority of the film focuses on different moments of Simon announcing his queerness to others, both privately and publicly (in front of a crowd of students, publicly), and how he plucks up the courage to move from inwardly acknowledging his queerness to outwardly acknowledging his queerness.

The following year, another coming-of-age comedy that centred its narrative around 'outness' as a necessity in truly living entitled *Booksmart* (Wilde 2019), was released. Similar to *Love Simon*, one of the film's primary characters, Amy, is confirmed to be a lesbian from the film's start. Unlike Simon, her story does not involve the fears or focus of coming out, but does neglect to acknowledge the importance of 'inness' and independence in tandem with fulfilment. The film follows Amy and her best friend, Molly, who desperately try to engage with as much typical adolescent fun the day before their graduation. Their decision to embark on this journey occurs after they realise that their decision to 'stay in' and succeed academically throughout highschool was a mistake that caused them to 'miss out' on experiences that all their other classmates – who also succeeded academically – experienced. The film emphasises the importance of outwardness with fears of missing out and shapes it around Amy's experiences of queerness by articulating how she feels her decisions to focus on school and neglect opportunities to experience common teenage romantic angst has resulted in her 'missing out'. While both films tackle different stages of adolescence in their perspective plots, there is still an

emphasis on the concept of visibility and inclusive sociability in regards to their queer characters' existence within each narrative. The idealistic importance of being 'out' and included is held adjacent to the idealistic importance of being queer and attests to experiences of queerness within white or Western spaces.

The Half of It (2020), which was released a year after *Booksmart* and two years after *Love, Simon*, presents an alternative to narratives of Western young adulthood by following the story of a teenaged, Chinese lesbian named Ellie Chu. The plot revolves around Ellie aiding one of her peers, Paul Munsky, by writing love letters to the girl they both have a crush on for him in exchange of payment that will help her father pay their bills. The film, which was originally perceived by audiences as a romantic comedy, sets a tone that strays away from the insistence of self-declaration in queer adolescence and redefines what queerness looks like, feels like, and moves like when it is experienced and reimagined from a racialized perspective. While Ellie never confirms her queerness within the film's dialogue by saying, 'I am gay/queer/a lesbian,' her identity is noteworthy from the film's start through her engagement with her crush, Aster Flores. Similar to Paul's interactions with Aster, Ellie is seen feeling flustered in her presence, stumbling on her words, and glancing at her longingly after Aster helps pick up her things in the hallway (Wu 00:10:09-00:11:00). It can be inferred by the racist bullying she encounters repeated throughout the film that Ellie's choice in not announcing her queerness is a reflection of her lack of friends to share these experiences with, but also an active decision to avoid further presenting differences in her identity in comparison to her peers.

Unlike Simon and Amy, who are white, financially well-off students living in the liberal West Coast, Ellie is an Asian-American immigrant, living in a small town located in the Pacific Northwest who has to work in order to, in the literal sense, keep the lights on for her family (Wu

00:11:02-19). Lee reminds us that from Western perspectives, adolescent Asian Americans are already perceived as being "too insular [and] too separate" from their peers, and are labelled as "the loner, the awkward nerd, the one who does not work well in groups or with others, the one who cannot socialise properly, who does not take part in enough extracurricular group activities" (39-40) within these respective environments. Ellie's race, hometown, and economic status makes her "ill-fitted to certain narrative fantasies of meaningful and intimate forms of relationality [that are always] tethered to the form of [...] white" (Lee 28) queerness. And she is never allowed to forget how ill-fitted she is in white America with the racially motivated taunting her peers subject her to throughout the film. Lee, however, encourages us to read "maladjusted forms of asociality [as] not a failure but instead a critique of how understandings of the social and the relational are based on individuated and autonomous formations of the subject that do not and cannot hold" (40). Therefore, the very existence of Ellie Chu as a protagonist, challenges a plethora of arguments surrounding the importance of publicising one's queerness for the sake of being 'out' and included. As a queer woman of colour in the small town of Squahamish (Wu 00:35:56-58) where *The Half of It* is set, Ellie already faces what Lee describes as "the difficulties of navigating social worlds," resulting in her "need to sometimes pull back from them" (31) and making her a personified example of what Lee defines as "staying in" (28); she makes active choices to not engage with the typical aspects of Western adolescence (ex., partying, school sanctioned events, social gatherings etc.) and moves through the atmosphere of the film unknown by those around her, but secure within this placement of inwardness. Unlike Simon or Amy, she does not spend time pondering on the possibility that she is "missing out on too much" (Lee 31), but spends a majority of the film in atmospheres of secluded intimacies that help her come into her queerness, rather than come out of it. Her inwardness "points toward the

desire to want to relate, to show up for another, but when one is ready, and in ways that alter the horizon of what constitutes the social [...] affiliations, and models of care borne out of it” (Lee 31). When Ellie does profess her love for Aster in code (Wu 01:29:11-30:32), in private (00:40:05-34), and anonymously throughout a majority of the film, she is not doing so with the assertion that her queerness is something she is ashamed of or believes should be hidden, but rather is of the assertion that her queerness does not require expressions of grandeur or the introspection of others. She does not see a need to mould her existence into something that can be shared or perceived by her peers because her existence is not justified on the acknowledgement of their perception.

It may appear on the surface that the choice Wu makes in having her film focus heavily on moments of privacy, intimacy, and aloneness rather than the presentation of explicitly ‘coming out’ with queerness is not a major decision of radicalism as I am claiming it to be. However, when the concept of publicising queer intimacy is considered in both a political and apolitical context, Wu’s choices make for compelling arguments that denounce the emergence of neoliberal queerness that has become popularised within the last few decades. I argue Wu’s film questions why the requirement of ‘coming out’ of straightness and into queerness has become so standardised. Specifically, I note that *The Half of It* focusing on how ‘staying in’ emphasises ways ‘coming out’ upholds methods of conservatism and social capital. In his essay, “The Law of Kinship: Lawrence v. Texas and the Emergence of Queer Liberalism”, author David Eng proposes a sense of caution to how definitions of the queer identity and its intimacies are being transformed within modern liberal spaces. His findings address the origins of coming out, which existed as prevention to society from engaging with sodomy, and interrogates the emergence of queer liberation as “promotion” (Eng 31) within the modern era, suggesting it’s existence to be

less about the embrace of differences queerness extends in society, but is actually about confining queerness to appear adjacent to heterosexuality.

Neoliberalism and queerliberalism “enunciates [...] difference in [a] register of [queer] culture [...] that is freely exchanged (purchased) and celebrated (consumed)” (Eng 30) in order to curate a presentation of queer intimacies that are digestible to non-queer audiences by having them mirror structures of conventional (heterosexual) intimacies. Prior to structures of queerliberalism and neoliberalism, ‘coming out’ was not a requirement or expectation when engaging in queerness, but rather, queerness was positioned as an expression of deviant (sexual) intimacy that did not require the presence or approval of others. Historically, the concept of coming out was not initially an enactment of ascribing oneself to a label or ‘other’ – but has since evolved into an abstraction of “political kinship” (Eng 26-28) that serves as a replacement of familial/domestic structures within queer spaces. Essentially, in a western context, queerness has been transformed into a commodity of domesticized intimacies that is articulated through actions that reject sodomy and inform innocence, but reflects the process of obtaining capital. When one is ‘coming out’ as queer, they are essentially ‘advertising’ or presenting themselves as a product that will either be ‘accepted’ and “purchased” or ‘rejected’ and “declined” (Eng 30). With the action of ‘coming out’ one is either socially rich (accepted) or socially poor (rejected) and the emphasis on ‘coming out’ is one that mimics the peg legs that uphold capitalist structures all the same. Henceforth why the rejection of ‘coming out’ as a stipulant on what defines queerness is something that is so crucial to the queer experience.

In *The Half of It*, there are a multitude of lines and scenes that emulate the notion of how one can make the choice of ‘staying in’ and being queer. For this portion and remainder of this essay, I want to examine the character dynamics between Ellie, her friend Paul, and their crush,

Aster, to express just how possible and significant the inwardness of being queer can be. To begin, I want to look deeper into Ellie's friendship with Paul, which in many ways, expresses a sort of queerplatonic relationship. In relation to concepts of 'staying in' and 'coming out', the moments of their relationship that are most defining are ones spent both privately and intimately. There is a scene where Ellie is helping Paul gain information on Aster so that the letters they send to her read as interpersonal and sentimental. As they sit in his car outside Aster's house, Paul makes an attempt to try and get to know Ellie as well. In this scene, he asks her why her and her father decide to stay in Squahamish if they both seem so unhappy and when Ellie, in offence and embarrassment that she has been noticed, attempts to leave, Paul expresses why he himself stays in Squahamish even if it makes him feel unfulfilled (Wu 00:32:28-00:33:15). Ellie then explains how the disadvantages her father has faced due to prejudicial judgement of education received in non-Western countries are why they haven't been able to leave Squahamish. When she is about to comment on other disadvantages her father faces, such language barriers, Paul comes to his own conclusions that it is a result of her father's inability to communicate. To ease her embarrassment and frustration, he replies sympathetically "I don't speak very good either" (00:34:15-18), creating a sense of connection between Ellie and Paul's experiences of 'missing out' by 'staying in'. The reason for why I find this scene so compelling is because of the set up for how the scene is performed, as well as what it implies. The physical structure of the scene – sitting in a car, alone, after dark – presents a moment of romanticism that is commonly executed in heterosexual young adult media. Had this been a heterosexual romance film, there would be high possibility or expectation that Ellie and Paul would kiss, however, the nature of their conversation demonstrates a level of intimacy that is best suited for a platonic relationship. The 'queer' aspect of this queerplatonic moment is how both characters express things about

themselves that mimic an intimate ‘coming out’ scene, but it is unconventional because the things they are ‘coming out’ with express why they make the choices to ‘stay in’ Squahamish with their families. Anna-Marie Fortier defines this as the first of three stages in the “queer migration” (115) of the childhood home, where the act of ‘coming out’ is not understood as an advertisement of one’s queerness, but is the ‘moving out’ of what one understands as a home that is “not foundational” (116) and assembling a social home found through like individuals (117). In the instance of the film, Ellie and Paul metaphorical ‘move out’ of their homes and ‘move in’ within the ontological structure of a home with one another, thus creating a space of queerness between each other that does not require or call to the standardised methods of ‘coming out’. For Ellie and Paul, “being queer [or different] and being at home with the family are kept separate” (120). This ontology for Paul is disturbed in his (straight) relationship with Aster, as when he is with her, he opts toward the conventional structures of ‘coming out’ (Wu 00:50:08-51) and advertises his feelings for her publicly, further emphasising the significance in reframing the necessities of ‘coming out’.

Contrasting Ellie and Paul to Ellie and Aster, the structure of their relationship is about the same fundamentally. However, because Ellie and Aster serve as the queerromantic relationship within the film, introspection on how their dynamic is executed services the plot differently. Like Ellie and Paul, Aster and Ellie both exist on the outside of their atmospheres, looking in on what is happening around them. Similarly to Paul, Aster technically has an ‘in’ with her surroundings because of her social status as the school’s ‘it’ girl. However, she does not seem to connect with this title the way her peers believe she should. Something Aster writes to Ellie (who she believes is Paul) is that when people give her attention in hopes that she likes them, it is not because they want her to actually like them but so that they are able to say “[they]

am like [her]” (Wu 00:17:28-31). There is a false sense of inclusion that acts more as a passive exclusion that makes for Aster’s active choice to ‘stay in’ and ‘miss out’. The connection Ellie and Aster make throughout the film is interesting because for a majority of the narrative, they do not actually engage with one another face to face; their interactions are private, intimate, and require the action of being queer and ‘staying in’. In fact, there are only four instances within the entire film in which Ellie and Aster spend genuine time with one another and each time is met with a level of intimacy that knows no bounds of publicity.

An hour into the film, Ellie and Aster share a moment of ‘coming out’ to one another, similar to Paul and Ellie, except their space of seclusion is outdoors, where anyone could invite themselves into their space. However, the atmosphere they’ve created with one another has made it so comfortable and private that they both feel that “no one can reach [them]” (Wu 01:09:34-36). During this time, there is a shared moment of inwardness between them as they provide explanations for why they choose to ‘stay in’ a town that won’t allow them to ‘come out’, their own interpretations of love, their hopes, and their dreams. This scene acts as a juxtaposition of how the publication of queerness can be privatised in a way that services those directly engaging with the queerness. Queerness in many instances can act as an unintentional pressure cooker within the spaces it inhabits, and can find itself at a tug of war with “[...] microaggressions that suggest “[it doesn’t] belong here” (Barrett et, al. 138), that its existence is under surveillance of “behavioural policing” (138) that dictates when it is and is not welcome or can and cannot be known. However, this scene of enacting queerness, intimately but publicly, reforms concepts of being ‘out’ and ‘queer’ and completely rejects the very notion as a necessity and informs concepts of being ‘in’ and ‘queer’. Compared to the moments of Aster being ‘out’ and ‘straight’ with Paul and her boyfriend Trig, her movement through each scene, through each interaction

was rigid and rehearsed, whereas with Ellie, she is fluid and performed; she is natural and queer and in, and Ellie is the same because they “share similar experiences of exile and forced migration” (Fortier 117). The same can also be said for the scene where Ellie ‘comes out’ as the wordsmith behind Aster and Paul’s letters (01:29:11-30:32) – which is done so in front of a crowd, however the crowd is not acknowledged until *after* Aster storms off – or when Ellie and Aster share a kiss, outdoors, in an empty street (01:35:43-36:06) and promise to see each other again; a promise to complete the queer migration and to return home (Fortier 120). The promise to come back home as ‘in’ and ‘queer’.

Queerness as a concept is something that is ever so personal and individualised to the person experiencing it. As deconstructed throughout this essay, there is no one right way to move, exist, or construct oneself as queer. The requirement that queerness be standardised as a checklist or operate as a function of announcing or proclaiming eliminates the possibility of integrated moments of queer experiences and perspectives that do not rely on the necessity of curating queerness on a public level. *The Half of It* (2020) directed by Alice Wu, takes this concept of ‘outness’, this function of publicity, and reforms it in a way that challenges the standard expectations of queerness, forcing us to perceive moments of seclusion, isolation, and inwardness as what crafts experiences of queerness that are far more common than we are lead to believe. Her creation of dynamics between Ellie, Aster, and Paul, as well as many others not discussed within this essay, create an ideological understand of queerness that suggests the importance of acknowledging the independence of what it means to be queer, and asks us as the audience to reconsider how one can navigate the world as being ‘in’ and ‘queer, simultaneously.

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