

“Finally, She’s Accepted Herself!”

Coming Out in Neoliberal Times

Stephanie D. Clare

My cousin and I came out to our respective parents about ten years apart from one another. Our parents are good friends. They regularly share meals and celebrate holidays together. In the early 2000s, however, in Montreal, Québec, my announcement was met with horror and panic. It was seen as premature and limiting: “What if your lifestyle turns away a guy who might otherwise make a pass at you?”¹ In comparison, although we both came out at roughly the same age, my cousin was framed as a “late bloomer.” Her announcement was greeted by relief. She had, a family member called to tell me, “finally accepted herself.” Thus, in just ten years, parental response had transformed. Disapproval morphed into its opposite: not simply acceptance but approval—at least, so it seemed.

This essay investigates contemporary lesbian and gay coming out narratives in contexts where the public expression of homophobia is often viewed as unenlightened. Drawing on a broad archive, I track a repeated, transnational dynamic that has become increasingly widespread, though certainly not evenly either domestically or transnationally. Over and over again, the “problem” with gay and lesbian identities is figured not as one’s queerness but, rather, one’s (potential) lack of self-acceptance. In fact, this “lack” might be understood as a new form of queerness, one that is tied not necessarily to the breaching of gender and sexual norms but to the breaching of a new set of norms concerning self-assertion and transparency, norms whose performance is especially valued in neoliberal culture. I argue that the new coming out narrative at once both disavows and points to the continued presence of heteronormativity and queer oppression in everyday life. It also indexes widespread adherence to a model of the self as transparent and naturally self-interested, a model that is deeply

connected to neoliberal understandings of individuality and to the conservative notions of adjustment and adaptation that are central to neoliberal governance. I trace these notions of adjustment and adaptation both in neoliberal discourse and in the psychological movement that sought to depathologize homosexuality. Ultimately, I show how the out gay subject has become the well-adapted, neoliberal subject par excellence.

Queer and queer of color scholarship has already shed light on some of the key problems associated with coming out narratives, and this essay builds on this work. The ubiquity of coming out narratives, early queer theorists argued, consolidates a minoritizing and essentializing model of gay identity. Coming out disciplines desires to fit existing categories of management and confinement and places queerness in a double bind wherein the queer subject is punished both for not being out enough and for being out.² Still more, that coming out has been understood as the most emancipated way to be gay has the danger of prioritizing white subjects and dismissing how sexuality, race, gender, and class are lived intersectionally. The visibility, for instance, associated with being out is not necessarily freeing. Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr. argues that African American men on the down low navigate the traps of visibility. He explains how “spectacles . . . become controlled by those who have the power to determine their meaning and make public those things that marginal subjects hide for safekeeping.”³ Therefore, rather than viewing coming out as the only marker of agency and self-determination, McCune reads the down low as a practice of “agency under the constraint of surveillance.”⁴ McCune’s analysis is quite different from C. Riley Snorton’s interpretation of the down low as a form of glass closet “marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle and speculation.”⁵ Yet both scholars show how both the closet and the out gay subject are racialized, building on Marlon Ross’s important essay “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm.” Similarly, in his analysis of Dominican immigrant men living in New York City, Carlos Decena explains how many Dominican men there who have sex with men do not feel the need to be explicit about their sexuality with others who are important to them. Instead, they partake in and depend upon social networks that require their sex lives to remain tacit. Decena also links the belief that all lesbian and gay people ought to come out to neoliberalism. “Today,” he writes, “one comes out not to be radical or change the world but to be a ‘normal’ gay subject.” Coming out is no longer the “beginning of a project of social transformation—as coming out was understood in the early days of gay liberation.” Instead, it becomes a practice of “individual self-realization . . . severed from collective social change.”⁶ Such a framework for understanding coming out, Decena argues, is consistent with a “neoliberal world that exalts the atomized and unmoored individual.”⁷

Building on Decena's analysis, and on this scholarship more broadly, I show how it is not simply that neoliberalism celebrates the atomized, unmoored individual. Rather, neoliberalism espouses a model of the human as naturally ready to maximize his or her own interest and as transparent about that interest. As a result, in the context of neoliberalism, one comes out not simply to be a normal lesbian or gay person but also, more generally, to be seen as a normal person. Appreciating the connection between neoliberalism and being out does not in itself explain the recent relative success of American homonormative lesbian and gay politics, but this connection is an important, contributing factor.⁸ In addition, understanding this connection contributes to research concerning the relationship between neoliberalism and contemporary sexual politics. It explains how neoliberalism can at once valorize the private and yet remain consonant with the imperative to come out.⁹ It also makes clear another limitation with viewing coming out as consonant with self-determination and agency: by adhering to neoliberal normalcy, this coming out narrative has the danger of treating the effects of structural inequality as the personal failure of those who suffer from it. This is especially pernicious as one considers sexuality in its intersection with racial injustice.

One final note before continuing: I focus on lesbian and gay coming out narratives to avoid the elision of difference sometimes embedded in the acronym *LGBT* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) and *LGBTQ* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer and/or questioning). That is to say, expectations of transgender, bisexual, and queer subjects are different from those of lesbian and gay people, even in relatively liberal contexts, albeit public responses, for instance, to Caitlyn Jenner's transition and to the Netflix series *Transparent*, created by Jill Soloway, were largely positive. President Obama tweeted in praise of Jenner's courage; ESPN gave Jenner an award. But no one suggested that there was anything wrong with either Jenner or the adult protagonist of *Transparent* for not transitioning earlier in life. Characters in *Transparent*, such as the protagonist's adult children, were not portrayed as immediately accepting. Still more, both the show and Jenner's media presence were met with some ambivalence. On National Public Radio, Terry Gross fumbled over her use of pronouns in reference to Jill Soloway's parent, who also transitioned as an older adult.¹⁰ In the *New York Times*, articles that explored tensions between feminism and transgender politics appeared.¹¹ Therefore, although there is some overlap between lesbian, gay, and transgender modes of appearance, the narrative I draw attention to here is particular to lesbian and gay subject positions.¹² Similarly, this narrative is not equally applicable to queer or bisexual identities. This is because, as my students continually make clear to me, *queer*, unlike *lesbian* and *gay*, is not a widely recognizable term, identity, or political position in popular culture. Bisex-

uality, in turn, continues to be met with skepticism.¹³ In contrast, in the coming out narrative that I study here, lesbian and gay subjects (sometimes understood as homosexuals) are seen as finally accepting themselves. It is this assumption that this article examines.

You're Gay! We're So Thrilled You Finally Told Us!

I begin with some examples of both fictional and nonfictional representations of recent lesbian and gay coming out narratives to show, first, how they valorize self-acceptance and, second, how they disavow the existence of present-day lesbian and gay oppression. Take *Rita*, a 2012 Danish television series that gained increasing popularity as it streamed on Netflix in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. The show features a feisty, nonconformist, white Danish teacher, the mother of three children. In the first episode, her youngest child, a teenager, is teased over and over again by his siblings and mom: he's gay! They all seem certain. If only he would come out! The boy, Jeppe, is clearly embarrassed and horrified by the suggestion, but at the end of the episode he gives in. His family is right: he is gay. When he finally announces the news, his mother hugs him. His siblings all smile: what a relief.

The series frames coming out as compulsory for acceptance. After Jeppe comes out, he is no longer teased. The series also figures those who identify as straight as completely accepting of Jeppe's sexual identity, an identity they in fact interpellate him to occupy. In contrast, it is Jeppe, the gay person, who seems to have a problem with his own lack of self-acceptance. He is the one who has a violent reaction to his own desire (he vomits on a bus while thinking about it). No one else seems to be concerned about his sexuality, just his perceived lack of self-assertion about it. As long as Jeppe does not recognize, embrace, and publicly perform who he really is thought to be, he is seen as somehow lacking.

Yet *Rita* also makes clear that which, at the very same time, it disavows. For one thing, it is worth noting the obvious: Jeppe has at least once been assumed to be heterosexual, for why else would he have to come out as gay later? The show therefore demonstrates the continued presence of compulsory heterosexuality. Next, Jeppe's family teases him about sex, making a series of lewd jokes. His sister's recent breakup with her boyfriend and his brother's recent engagement to his girlfriend are not subject to such banter. In other words, for his family members, Jeppe appears as a figure of the sexual, while heterosexuality is not necessarily linked to sex. Thus, while Jeppe's family are happy he has finally come out, he is made to occupy a position that is intently sexual and that has to be pointed out as such.

Jeppe's situation is similar to that of Rod, a character in the Broad-

way musical *Avenue Q*, which since 2003 has toured the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Rod is portrayed as a closeted gay man who has clearly not accepted himself. His obsession with cleanliness is meant to index his lack of self-acceptance, and this is supposed to be amusing. The musical includes the song “If You Were Gay,” which Nicky, Rod’s best friend, sings to Rod, beckoning him to accept his gayness. Nicky claims, “If you were gay, that would be okay.” The problem with Rod, in Nicky’s view, is not that Rod is gay but, rather, that he has not asserted it. The audience is placed in the same position as Nicky. We are meant to think that there is something wrong with Rod’s expression of his sexuality and to be amused by this or to laugh at him because of this (but not because of his sexuality). Rod, in turn, interrupts Nicky throughout the song. He is embarrassed and does not want to assert anything. Yet while the musical frames lack of self-acceptance as the problem, at the same time it demonstrates how not being gay is preferred. While singing his song, Nicky asserts several times that he is not gay: “If it were me, I would feel free to say that I’m gay, but I’m not gay.” He repeats this phrase, “I’m not gay,” later in the song again.

Jeppe and Rod remain, of course, fictional characters, but their experiences resonate with many people who contribute to social media online. For instance, after coming out to her parents in 2015, Bri Johnson, a twenty-two-year-old African American woman, posted a video on her Tumblr page. The video went viral and was featured in the American-based *Huffington Post* and *BuzzFeed*, on the Toronto-based website *WDish*, and on *Metro*, a similar site based in London. The video features Bri’s mother, LaTanza, opening and closing a closet door. LaTanza reenacts what it was like to wait for her daughter’s self-disclosure. She unseals the door, peers into the closet and asks, “Are you coming out? No, not yet? Alright.” She closes the door, and again, she knocks, “You ready? Oh, okay, well let us know when you’re coming out!”¹⁴ The video ends with Bri’s mother explaining that the door was never locked. Bri laughs. This is, clearly, a loving portrayal; Bri seems to like her mother’s response, and she posted it online with no complaint about her reaction. But similar to the portrayals of Jeppe and Nicky, this video suggests that it is the daughter, Bri, who had the trouble, not anyone else. She only has to accept herself.

Just two months later, Loren Baldwin, a white woman also in her twenties, posted a video on YouTube where she comes out to her grandmother. In the video, Loren is clearly nervous, but her grandmother simply responds, “I knew all along.” The two hug, and the older woman continues: “You were afraid to tell me? Why? Let it go.” Loren cries and eventually responds: “Thank you for being so accepting and loving me no matter what.”¹⁵ Loren, the video suggests, had no reason to feel nervous

about this disclosure, and yet at the very same time, she must thank her grandmother for accepting her. Two things are happening at once here. On the one hand, the interaction suggests that it is not a problem that Loren is gay—what’s strange is that she hasn’t told people. Yet at the same time, Loren is clearly positioned as lesser than because she needs acceptance and feels thankful for being loved notwithstanding her disclosure. It goes without saying, too, that no one, including Loren’s grandmother, would think Loren needed to out herself unless she was once assumed to be heterosexual.

Thus, across these examples, heterosexuality remains the valorized norm, yet coming out is framed as a form of self-acceptance rather than the breaching of norms. In addition, in this framework, to not come out is to have a problem with one’s self—not to have a social, cultural, or political problem. And finally, coming out is framed as belated, always already too late.

This was not always the case. Reviewing previous, common coming out narratives helps to highlight what is particular about the present. In 1977, Mark Goldstaub, a middle-class Jewish American man in his twenties, came out to his parents, Sylvia and Bernie Goldstaub. In response, they “fought, yelled, and screamed.” Sylvia recounts, “We wouldn’t accept it. . . . Bernie and I were hysterical crying. We were devastated. We sat and cried every night.”¹⁶ Four years later, Sylvia and Bernie were still struggling with the news. Mark wrote to his lover, Edmund Wojcik, about his mother’s concerns: “She’s got all these thoughts in her head about how difficult it is to be a homosexual in today’s world. . . . She’s all concerned about how my being gay is going to be held against me in the business world.” Mark’s letter explains how hurt he feels that his parents have never met Edmund, but when his mother agrees that maybe the four of them could go for dinner, Mark balks. It’s a nice offer, he writes, “but I don’t think she was really thinking the whole thing through.” He admits to Edmund: “Honestly, honey, I don’t think I’m ready for that just yet.” Finally, Mark is protective of his parents: again, to Edmund, he writes, “I want you to know honey that my parents aren’t evil or bad people. They just have their own way of doing things and they don’t change easily. They’ve got their own image of the way things should be for their children. I’m not saying that’s right, I’m just trying to share a little something of them with you.”¹⁷

A few things are worth pointing out here. First, Mark is clear that Sylvia acknowledges that something like homophobia exists in the world. Sylvia is concerned that Mark will face discrimination in his professional life. Next, Mark is ambivalent. He wants his parents to acknowledge his relationship with Edmund, but he believes that none of them are ready for this. He does not blame himself for feeling this way. Instead, he seems to

believe that his parents need to work through accepted belief and feelings first. Finally, Mark tries to understand his parents' point of view. He does not demonize them but, rather, recognizes that they have ways of seeing the world that need to change. Throughout the letter, Mark has a sense that the present is not good enough. He calls for transformation while recognizing the limits of the present.

Although this is just one example, Sylvia Goldstaub would later become an active member of Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG), and something similar to her story and to Mark's would be reflected in much of the organization's literature. For example, during the early 1990s, PFLAG published a pamphlet for parents, "Can We Understand?"¹⁸ The pamphlet outlines the common path many parents faced upon learning that their child is gay. First comes shock. Many parents cannot talk about it without crying; many parents believe "they would be happier if they didn't know." Then comes guilt. Did the parents do something wrong? Finally, perhaps, comes acceptance. Another PFLAG publication from the 1990s, "Read This before Coming Out to Your Parents," repeats this narrative. The pamphlet lists the "states of understanding" parents go through upon hearing the news. These states including shock, denial, and guilt, states that are similar to those of grief: "Many families take the news as a temporary loss—almost as a death—of the son or daughter they have known and loved." The pamphlet frames shock as "a natural reaction that we all experience (and need for a while) to avoid acute distress and unpleasantness." While naturalizing parents' shock, the pamphlet does also recognize the existence of homophobia. Addressing its intended audience, the child, it explains: "Since living in a homophobic society has forced you to experience many of the same feelings (isolation, fear of rejection, hurt, confusion, fear of the future, etc.), you can share with [your parents] the similarities in the feelings you have experienced." However, the text urges the child to allow his or her parents "ample time to express themselves; don't let your needs overpower theirs." Some parents never get to "true acceptance."¹⁹ These PFLAG publications, like Mark's letter, acknowledge homophobia and highlight that there is something people need to work through upon learning that a loved one is gay. Still more, the texts do not pathologize someone who chooses not to come out to their family members. In fact, "Read This before Coming Out to Your Parents" encourages children not to come out unless they are absolutely sure of their sexual orientation.

Considering these narratives against those more prominent today, we can note several important differences. Compared with the earlier model, in the contemporary version those who receive the news of another person's gayness appear happy; they are, at least, relieved or glad to hear the person's self-disclosure. This can be seen as a positive change. Yet

this is coupled with other differences that raise concern. While the earlier narratives call for a transformation of those who receive the news that their loved one is gay, the new version brings the focus to the gay person. It is that person who has had to change so as to become self-accepting, not those who have received the news. In addition, the earlier narrative, unlike the most recent one, does not pathologize those who choose not to come out. And most centrally, whereas Mark Goldstaub's story and the PFLAG documents acknowledge homophobia and heteronormativity, the current narrative reasserts heterosexuality as the norm while disavowing homophobia. Lesbian and gay oppression, of course, remains prominent. LGBTQ youth are vulnerable to homeless, excessive punishment, and violence, especially as queerness intersects with other forms of oppression, most especially racism and citizenship status.²⁰ Within this context—and especially if one is susceptible, following Ruth Gilmore, to premature death—some people might choose not to be public about their sexuality, if they can make that choice.²¹ The current narrative, however, does nothing to recognize this. It locates the problem the formerly closeted gay person might have had within his or her own head, not in continued oppression.

“Oppression,” as Marilyn Frye argues, is connected to the term *press*. Frye writes, “Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce.”²² Frye’s essay focuses on the position of women, showing how they are often caught between competing expectations and demands that leave them with little place to maneuver. She gives the example of how women are punished both for being sexually active and for being sexually inactive. In such a context, women are left restrained, acting within a limited field. Such a double bind is also present in the recent lesbian and gay coming out narratives that I described above. On the one hand, lesbian and gay youth are told that they ought to accept themselves and be open about their sexuality. On the other hand, they are asked to agree that it would be better were they not gay. And so Lauren who comes out to her grandmother should not be worried about her grandmother’s reaction, yet at the same time she ought to be grateful to her grandmother for accepting her. Rod, in turn, ought to come out, just like Nick would were he gay, and yet he has to listen to Nick insisting that he himself is not gay. Jeppe must also assert himself as a gay man even if he is then made to occupy a limited position where he is continually connected to sex. To be clear, these experiences are significantly different from that of physical violence, excessive punishment, and homelessness, yet following Frye’s definition and example, it becomes clear that they, too, are experiences of oppression. Thus, it is not simply that the coming out narratives I have traced

deny continued lesbian and gay oppression but also that the narratives in themselves index oppression.

In short, the problem with the coming out narrative that I have traced is not only that it stabilizes categories of sexual identity, not only that it prioritizes subjects with the privilege to risk losing kinship relations, but also that it disavows the continued presence of inequality, homophobia, and heteronormativity, framing these as problems within the gay or lesbian subject rather than in the world at large and trapping youth within a double bind where they are forced to accept themselves, and yet, at the same time, they are incited to see themselves as lesser than. This discursive knot bares similarities to the discourse and practice of inclusion, as recently analyzed by Sara Ahmed. “Inclusion,” Ahmed writes, can “be read as a technology of governance: not only as a way of bringing those who have been recognized as strangers into the nation, but also of making strangers into subjects, those who in being included are also willing to consent to the terms of inclusion.”²³ In this case, the children are included in that they are accepted as part of the heterosexual family, and yet the terms of this inclusion require that they valorize heterosexuality and not contest heteronormativity. They ought to put any homophobia behind them, as though they themselves were its author.²⁴ When the parent responds to the child, “Of course we’d accept you, why would you think otherwise?,” the child might then say, “Because, living in this world, I’ve picked up cues over and over again that being straight is valorized, prized, cherished. Because I see how we are treated inequitably over and over again. I want to change that world, rather than adjust to it.” These sentences, however, are not part of the current story.

A Neoliberal Self

The prominence of this relatively recent coming out narrative can be explained, in part, by its adherence to neoliberal common sense, a phrase I draw from David Harvey to denote widely accepted truths not limited to economic thought per se yet traceable to neoliberal theory and its uptake. As Harvey has written, “Neoliberalism . . . has pervasive effects on . . . thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”²⁵ The form of common sense that I want to focus on here is the belief that human beings are self-interested and ideally transparent about that interest. To make this argument, I bring attention to a relatively underread passage in Michel Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics*, showing its relevance to contemporary queer studies.

As is well known, the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*

has been central in queer studies, including in critiques of the coming out narrative. In this text, Foucault interrupts the belief that claiming one's sexuality is a practice of liberation. He links the production of sexual categories, such as the homosexual, to the development of disciplinary regimes that seek to classify, structure, and contain bodies while placing them in hierarchical relations that legitimize and produce positions of expertise, such as the sexologist, psychologist, and criminologist. This argument was central to queer theory's early articulations. For instance, building on Foucault, Judith Butler begins "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" by explaining her reluctance to "write or speak as a lesbian" since "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."²⁶ Butler argues that these identity categories make it appear as though heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality are discrete and clearly differentiable. Her critique of identity draws heavily on Foucault's diagnostic of disciplinary power.

However, while early queer theory drew on this part of Foucault's writing, in Foucault's 1978–79 lectures at the Collège de France, later published as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault understands the management of sexuality under neoliberalism quite differently. In these lectures, Foucault situates the emergence of American neoliberalism in the postwar Chicago School, arguing that American neoliberalism is characterized by two central ideas. First, it treats the human subject as *homo economicus*. This economic man is not, however, primarily understood as a potential partner of exchange, as is the case in classical liberalism. Instead, he appears as an "entrepreneur of himself."²⁷ American neoliberalism understands human individuals as forms of capital because they are endowed with the potential to make an income. In this view, the individual becomes an entrepreneur of himself in that he manages his own human capital, maximizing it and actualizing its potential to pursue his own interests. The second important feature of American neoliberalism, in Foucault's view, is that it seeks to understand social phenomena on the model of the market economy. For instance, it develops analyses of marriage and motherhood as primarily economic (a mother's primary goal being to increase her child's human capital). In this case, economics comes to take priority over other domains of knowledge, such as "demography, sociology, psychology, and social psychology."²⁸

Drawing these two principles together, American neoliberals argue that *homo economicus* ought to be left alone by government—they adhere to the principle of *laissez-faire*; however, crucially, this does not mean that this subject is not governable. Rather, *homo economicus* acts in his interests within an environment. To modify his behavior, we can act on this

environment, not on the person himself. For example, we might curtail smoking not through a public campaign that seeks to educate the public on cigarettes' health risk but simply by making cigarettes more expensive.

This understanding of neoliberalism suggests a very different governance of sexuality than the one Foucault outlined in *The History of Sexuality*. Whereas disciplinary power gives form to and normalizes sexuality, neoliberalism, Foucault argues, entails a “massive withdrawal” of “the normative-disciplinary system.”²⁹ Foucault writes that “on the horizon” of American neoliberalism “we see . . . the image, idea, or theme program of a society . . . in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated.”³⁰ Indeed, in *The Constitution of Liberty*, first published in 1960, Friedrich Hayek, the influential theorist of neoliberalism, wrote that homosexuality, “however abhorrent it may be to the majority, is not a proper subject for coercive action for a state whose object is to minimize coercion.”³¹ At the heart of Hayek's argument was the assumption that this tolerated homosexuality would remain a “private practice among adults,” and Hayek sought to protect this privacy: “A man's house is his castle,” he wrote. “Nobody has a right even to take cognizance of his activities within it.”³²

This valorization of privacy has been highlighted in existing studies of the sexual politics of neoliberalism. Most centrally, Lisa Duggan's analysis of “homonormativity” makes visible the development of a gay politics that favors “public recognition of a domesticated, depoliticized privacy.”³³ Instead of seeking to transform institutions and norms central to heterosexuality, neoliberal sexual politics “upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”³⁴ It is such a valuation of privacy that gave shape, as Jasbir Puar argues, to the *Lawrence v. Texas* ruling, which struck down laws against sodomy between consenting adults in private. The protection of this private realm cordons off queerness, restricting it to the private.³⁵ This is a problem not just from the perspective of those marginalized simply because of sexuality but, more important, for those who lack access to the private in the first place.³⁶ In any case, in queer studies, a central argument has been that the sexual politics of neoliberalism seeks to secure a place for nonheterosexual practice in the private realm.

The imperative to come out, however, is somewhat at odds with this vision of neoliberalism. It is true that the coming out narratives I described highlight domesticity: children come out to their family members—parents, grandparents, siblings. They are not coming out as in joining a queer or LGBT social and cultural group. But then these coming out stories get a larger audience on social media. The stories are broadcasted on television. They appear in Broadway musicals. In other words, at least according to these coming out narratives, gay and lesbian identities are certainly not

sequestered to a private realm. They are instead visible and compelled to be visible.³⁷

Understanding the form of subjectivity at the heart of the neoliberal imaginary can help to explain this imperative to come out notwithstanding the neoliberal valorization of privacy. It also makes visible a second way in which neoliberalism interacts with sexual politics. If we understand humans primarily as *homo economicus*, then we need not govern them through social means, such as those analyzed in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge*. Instead, all we need is to modify the environment and let the individual seek out his or her own interest within that context. But this form of governance requires subjects who, as entrepreneurs of themselves, recognize their own interests. These subjects need to know what they want and go after it. They need to be self-seeking, self-directed, and self-interested. “Neoliberalism,” as Liz Bondi argues, “works by installing a concept of the human subject as an autonomous, individualized, self-directing, decision-making agent at the heart of policy-making”³⁸ In the “neoliberal grammar of success,” it is not who you are that is important but rather “‘how good are you at what you do? How successful are you?’ and the true bottom line: ‘how much and how well do you maximize your interests?’”³⁹ The out gay person is, par excellence, such a subject. She asserts herself, knows what she wants, and directs herself toward this end in a regularized, predictable manner. If she were unclear about her interests, if her interests changed or were at odds with themselves, if they were interrupted by something resembling the death drive (more on this later), if they were shaped by other unconscious proclivities, then she would become ungovernable.

The notion of interest is central to the connection between neoliberalism and the out gay subject. Imagined at the heart of *homo economicus* is an “irreducible and nontransferable” interest.⁴⁰ The governable subject is a subject who goes after that interest. This understanding of interest is similar to the understanding of sexuality implicit in the coming out narratives I have analyzed. Gay subjects are defined by their own irreducible and nontransferable interest, in this case their sexuality. In neoliberal culture, the content of that sexuality or interest is less important than the fact that subjects come to pursue it in a regularized, predictable manner.⁴¹

The Neoliberal Self and the “Well-Adapted, Overt Homosexual”

The neoliberal self does not appear only in economic discourse. It also finds articulation in psychology, and to recognize this connection is to depart from Foucault’s understanding of neoliberalism. Foucault’s lecture on the Chicago School of neoliberalism ends with a surprising question. After arguing that neoliberalism involves a massive shrinking of the dis-

ciplinary apparatus, Foucault asks: “Does this mean that we are dealing with natural subjects?”⁴² The manuscript does not continue, and it is unclear whether Foucault poses this question sincerely or as an opening for critique. Indeed, Foucault’s assessment of neoliberalism remains the subject of debate.⁴³ Given his argument that neoliberalism involves a departure from the imperative to discipline and normalize, it is possible that Foucault agreed that the neoliberal subject was, indeed, a “natural” subject. Yet what he might have meant by *natural* is certainly not clear. Regardless, I leave the question of Foucault’s neoliberal proclivities aside to make a different point: whereas Foucault disarticulates neoliberalism from psychology, the two might rather be understood as functioning together.

Therapeutic cultures surrounding psychology and psychoanalysis helped constitute the neoliberal subject. As Nikolas Rose has influentially written of these cultures, “The individual is to become, as its were, an entrepreneur of itself, seeking to maximize its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, though enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its lifestyle.”⁴⁴ Rose focuses on the culture surrounding psychology in general, connecting this to neoliberalism. In contrast, I’d like to bring attention to a particular development in the history of American psychology and psychoanalysis. At the same time that the Chicago School gained prominence in economic thought, ego psychology also became hegemonic in the United States. This field of psychology attempted to rescue psychoanalysis from its 1920 elaboration in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, wherein Freud introduced the death drive. This drive, an instinct that propels humans to become inorganic, causes a compulsion for repetition and aggression and rests in continual tension with the libido. In other words, the existence of the death drive threatens the liberal subject who always pursues his or her own interest. Ego psychology, as established in the work of Heinz Hartmann, called the existence of the death drive into question.⁴⁵ Whereas Freud made space for tension between human nature and civilization, Hartmann and those who worked alongside him saw as their goal to strengthen the ego so that the patient would adapt and seek out his or her own interest. The assumption was that the ego, autonomous from drives, successfully finds solutions to environmental problems. Social institutions, in Hartmann’s view, could “mold, foster, and help the development of the individual, aiding the capacity for adaptation.”⁴⁶ This capacity became the “criterion of health.”⁴⁷ David Rapaport, a second key figure in ego psychology, explained that psychology could help patients to find their “place in society and lead a useful, productive life.”⁴⁸ This is what it meant to be healthy and to adapt.

Ego psychology became especially predominant in New York City

during the 1950s and 1960s, but its influence was not limited to that locale. Hartmann was the president of the International Psychoanalytical Association from 1951 to 1957, and his followers controlled the primary journals in the field: *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, and *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*. They were not known for including work that challenged Hartmann's theory.⁴⁹

Ego psychology and American neoliberalism are not simply coeval, however. Both imagine similar versions of the self. Neoliberal forms of governance focus on transforming the environment or social context within which subjects make decisions. This practice requires a self-directed, self-seeking, and enterprising self who will adapt to that environment. In turn, ego psychology attempts to strengthen the ego so that selves will adapt. In other words, the goal of this psychological practice seems to be to produce governable, neoliberal subjects, subjects who can adapt to given environments so as to meet their needs, subjects whose health is defined by the capacity to be productive, subjects who identify and seek out their own interests.

Starting in the 1970s, psychoanalytic discourse moved away from ego psychology, in part as a result of the rise of new social movements. The field would come to be "seen as a conservative voice of the past and of conformity."⁵⁰ And yet, ego psychology's influence did not disappear. Antonio Viegó argues that "the assumptions of ego and social psychology are still very much with us today in clinical and extraclinical contexts when we think about ethnic-racialized subjectivity and experience."⁵¹ Viegó contends that this is especially problematic for two reasons. First, racism, too, depends upon the notion of a whole, complete, and transparent form of subjectivity, a subject who is immediately legible and encapsulated by his or her appearance. Second, ego psychology places social "adjustment" at the heart of well-being, and Viegó shows how adjustment aligns with an assimilationist politics, with its limited vision of social transformation, justice, and freedom.

The concept of adjustment is central to gay history as well, and here we see the connections among ego psychology, neoliberalism, and coming out in particular.⁵² In 1957, Evelyn Hooker published her landmark study "The Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual." This text challenged the dominant position in psychology that homosexuality was, in itself, a "severe emotional disorder."⁵³ Hooker argued that this prior position was based on studies of an unrepresentative sample of homosexual men: those who were incarcerated, in mental hospitals, or in therapy. In contrast, Hooker recruited noninstitutionalized, "overt homosexual" men, which is to say men who identified themselves as homosexual and were out in at least some parts of their life. She found comparable heterosexual men, matched in IQ, age, and years of education, and administered several

tests, including the Rorschach test and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Leading psychologists reviewed the test data and were asked to ascertain, based on these data alone, whether a test subject was heterosexual or homosexual. The psychologists judged the results based on how well adjusted they believed the test subject to be. The best-adjusted subjects were to show “evidence of superior integration of capacities, both intellectual and emotional; ease and comfort in relation to the self and in functioning effectively in relation to the social environment.”⁵⁴ Hooker’s use of these tests shows the direct influence of ego psychology on her work. Whereas data from the Rorschach and TAT were once analyzed for signs of the unconscious, following Rapaport the tests were used to ascertain ego functioning, apart from the “encroachments by unconscious factors.”⁵⁵ The goal of the tests, in other words, was to measure how well adapted one was to the social environment. Since homosexuality at the time was seen as a severe emotional disorder, it was expected that homosexuals would be less adjusted and that sorting the heterosexual from the homosexual would be simple. It wasn’t. The psychologists could sort the results no better than they could have by chance. From this, Hooker drew several conclusions: homosexuals are just as varied from one another as are heterosexuals, homosexuality is within the range of psychological normalcy, and finally, although homosexuality itself might represent a “severe form of maladjustment to society in the sexual sector of behavior,” the homosexual is not necessarily “maladjusted in other sectors of his behavior.”⁵⁶ As the years progressed, Hooker would take a more radical approach, insisting that homosexuality was not a psychological illness and claiming that one can be both a homosexual and normal because overt male homosexuals are just as well adjusted as are heterosexual men.

Hooker’s research became influential, although not immediately; the success of Irving Bieber’s 1962 study of homosexual men under psychoanalytic care eclipsed Hooker’s work for a time. Supporting existing theories of homosexuality, Bieber argued that male homosexuality was maladaptive, a result of parent-child relations (often, the son was too close to his dominant mother and detached from his father).⁵⁷ However, as the years passed, Hooker’s research was republished and later repeated by psychiatrists and psychologists who came to agree that homosexuality was not pathological. Eventually, Hooker’s research became significant in removing homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1973.⁵⁸ At first, *homosexuality* was replaced by *sexual orientation disturbance*, a condition where a patient is upset by his or her sexual orientation. Thus, the prerequisite for not being pathologized became, if not pride, at least some form of self-acceptance and overtness about one’s sexuality.

Reading Hooker alongside ego psychology, we can see the develop-

ment of an idea of normal, where normal is not necessarily heterosexual but, rather, is defined as the condition of being well adjusted to the environment. This well-adjusted subject is the governable subject that neoliberalism calls for: those who can adjust to an environment to meet their own self-interests, those who know what they want and seek it with pride, those who are clear about their desires. The new coming out narrative that I traced traffics in this idea of normalcy. The subject who “finally accepts herself” knows what she wants and goes after it. She is not internally conflicted; she is not swayed by social pressure. She is well adjusted. She is transparent about her interest. “Finally,” she is normal.⁵⁹

It would, of course, take more than the convergence of neoliberalism, ego psychology, and the psychology of homosexuality for the emergence of the new coming out narrative that I have traced. Margaret Thatcher, for instance, was a staunch advocate of neoliberal practices, including structural adjustment programs, yet she certainly did not follow Hayek’s proposal that homosexuality ought to be irrelevant to the state, and she did not see the overt homosexual subject as well adapted.⁶⁰ Later lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer activism has clearly played a significant role in swaying public opinion. Yet it is in the context of neoliberalism that this activism, in part, has had influence; the acceptable form of lesbian and gay life becomes one that conforms to neoliberal ideals of selfhood. In fact, this form is no longer queer but normal and well adjusted.

Neoliberalism and the Pathologization of Politics

I have traced the emergence of a new coming out narrative, one that professes that the transgression of norms having to do with gender and sexuality is less significant today than the transgression of norms having to do with one’s supposed capacity to adapt to the environment, to accept one’s self, and to assert one’s interest. At the same time, this coming out narrative insists that being straight is best. My analysis placed this narrative within the context of neoliberalism, arguing that the subject valorized in this story is the neoliberal self, who adjusts to an environment to maximize his or her own interests. Finally, I showed how this neoliberal self appears in the psychology of homosexuality, which first produced the concept of the normal homosexual man.

Neoliberal normalcy is especially pernicious because it pathologizes both activist demands and the effects of structural inequality as personal failure. Most recently, this pathologization appeared in public media surrounding student activism concerning racial inequality at American universities. Students drew attention to persistent racism on college campuses. They asked that universities promote a culture that would reduce the quotidian microaggressions they face. Some argued for a more diverse

faculty. Others pointed to racial slurs and threats of violence from their peers. This activism was not universally dismissed, yet some saw it as a sign of students' own personal failure. In the *Atlantic*, for instance, Conor Friedersdorf considered students at Yale who protested after a master at a residential college, Silliman, sent out an e-mail that dismissed concerns about equity and inclusiveness on campus. Friedersdorf wrote,

According to *The Washington Post*, “several students in Silliman said they cannot bear to live in the college anymore.” These are young people who live in safe, heated buildings with two Steinway grand pianos, an indoor basketball court, a courtyard with hammocks and picnic tables, a computer lab, a dance studio, a gym, a movie theater, a film-editing lab, billiard tables, an art gallery, and four music practice rooms. But they can't bear this setting that millions of people would risk their lives to inhabit because one woman wrote an email that hurt their feelings?⁶¹

Friedersdorf, drawing on Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's “The Coddling of the American Mind,” suggests that the Yale students were “catastrophizing.” The e-mail, he implied, was no big deal. The students ought to be enjoying the facilities rather than giving voice to their grievances. In other words, the students ought to maximize their interests in this environment. They should not try to change that environment but, rather, adapt to it. They should not point out persistent inequalities. To the extent that they do either, they are pathological or at the very least immature: wanting to be coddled and partaking in faulty reasoning, such as catastrophizing. In contrast, grateful students would accept themselves and adapt to the culture rather than engage in politics. They might come out as gay or as lesbians, but certainly not to challenge heteronormativity or racism—simply to show how well adjusted they are and become good neoliberal, normal subjects.

Notes

Thank you to the Queer Studies group and others at the University at Buffalo for their comments on this essay, especially Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, Christine Varnado, Jonathan Katz, Rachel Ablow, Ruth Mack, and Sarah Kolberg. I am also grateful to Laurie Marhoefer and the two anonymous *Social Text* readers for their helpful suggestions.

1. The logic of this concern was, and remains, both baffling and scary—my agency and desire were utterly erased.

2. See Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”; and Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67–90.

3. McCune, *Sexual Discretion*, 6.

4. *Ibid.*, 8, 14. McCune reads the down low as connected to other practices in black American culture that value discretion and dissemblance. He writes, “The importance given to . . . terms [such as ‘hush-hush’ and ‘quiet as kept’] and discreet

doings in scenes of high social constraint (slavery, lynching, Jim Crow) speaks to a recognition of how integral the ‘out of sight’ moments were for those whose freedoms have historically been tied to secrets and careful renderings of information” (6).

5. Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know*, 4.

6. Decena, “Tacit Subjects,” 339.

7. *Ibid.*, 355.

8. I borrow this term from Duggan, “New Homonormativity.” Lisa Duggan defines homonormative sexual politics as a “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179).

9. For more on neoliberal sexual politics, see, for instance, Duggan, “New Homonormativity”; Ferguson and Hong, “Sexual and Racial Contradictions”; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; and Weiss, “Gay Shame and BDSM Pride.”

10. Gross, “Funny, Dirty, Sad.”

11. See Burkett, “What Makes a Woman?”; and Garelick, “Price of Caitlyn Jenner’s Heroism.”

12. I use the term *modes of appearance* here and later in this essay to designate the ways in which certain subject positions come to appear in the world—not only as they are represented in cultural forms but also as they are articulated and made sense of in everyday life.

13. Denizet-Lewis, “Scientific Quest.”

14. Nichols, “Mom Hilariously Reenacts.”

15. Nichols, “YouTuber Comes Out.”

16. Steven R. Biller, “We Fought, Yelled, Screamed,” *Sun-Sentinel*, 21 November 1990, in Goldstaub Family Collection, Box 1.

17. Mark Goldstaub to Edmund Wojcik, April 1981, Goldstaub Family Collection, Box 1.

18. PFLAG, “Can We Understand?,” pamphlet, ca. 1991–92, Goldstaub Family Collection, Box 1.

19. PFLAG, “Read This before Coming Out to Your Parents,” Goldstaub Family Collection, Box 1.

20. Durso and Gates, “Serving Our Youth”; Snapp et al., “Messy, Butch, and Queer”; National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, “National Report on Hate Violence.”

21. Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference.”

22. Frye, *Politics of Reality*, 54.

23. Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 163.

24. In some ways, this coming out narrative overlaps with the story Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes about coming out as a fat woman. Sedgwick writes, “Incredibly, in this society everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn’t herself know. . . . The desire to share this privileged information with the person thought to lack it is more than many otherwise civilized people can withstand” (*Tendencies*, 229–30). In this context, according to Sedgwick, to come out as a fat woman is both to signal to others that anti-fat statements are injurious to one’s self and to take some control over how one’s own body is represented. See Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 230. In contrast, the subtext to the coming out narrative I have analyzed does not so much indicate that homophobic or heteronormative speech will be injurious. Rather, it points to a tacit agreement that such speech has not and does not exist in the first place (at least in the family).

25. Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," 21. Also quoted in Read, "Genealogy of Homo-Economicus," 25.
26. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 308.
27. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 226.
28. *Ibid.*, 245.
29. *Ibid.*, 260.
30. *Ibid.*, 259–60.
31. Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 451.
32. *Ibid.*, 451, 142.
33. Duggan, "New Homonormativity," 190.
34. *Ibid.*, 179. Arguments concerning privacy, however, are not unique to the sexual politics of neoliberalism. As Laurie Marhoefer shows, whether "sexual outsiders" ought to accept a free realm of privacy and forgo public space was a source of tension between organizers of the world's first gay rights movement, Germany's movement for homosexual emancipation. See Marhoefer, *Sex in the Weimar Republic*, 202–3, 207–14.
35. Franke, "Domesticated Liberty."
36. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 124–25.
37. For more on how social media troubles the distinctions between the private and public realms, see Papacharissi, "Networked Self," 208. Zizi Papacharissi writes that social network sites allow people to pursue social activities in "private domestic environments." She continues, "The networked architecture of these sites affords publicity, in a manner that frequently does not distinguish between public and private boundaries" (208).
38. Bondi, "Working in the Spaces of Neoliberal Subjectivity," 499.
39. Winnubst, "Queer Thing about Neoliberal Pleasure," 86.
40. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 271–73.
41. This connection between interest and sexuality can help to explain why not all forms of coming out (such as coming out as fat or as an addict) are widely promoted under neoliberalism. My contention is that this difference can be explained, in part, by the prominent understanding of sexuality (unlike body size) as deep-seated, inherent, or even biologically fixed. These understandings attach to the neoliberal notion of interest such that to assert one's interest is also to assert one's sexuality.
42. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 261.
43. See the essays collected in Zamora and Behrent, *Foucault and Neoliberalism*; Becker, Ewald, and Harcourt, "Becker on Ewald on Foucault on Becker"; Dilts, "From 'Entrepreneur of the Self'"; and Dean, "Foucault Must Not Be Defended."
44. Rose, *Inventing Our Selves*, 158. For more on the connection between psychology and neoliberalism, see also Bondi, "Working in the Spaces of Neoliberal Subjectivity"; and Matza, "'Good Individualism?'"
45. Bergmann, "Hartmann Era," 9. See also Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein, "Notes on the Theory of Aggression."
46. Bergmann, "Hartmann Era," 14.
47. Qtd. in Bergmann, "Hartmann Era," 59.
48. Qtd. in *ibid.*, 15. As Martin Bergmann points out, "We note the social conformity, when Rapaport speaks of the patient's need to find his place in society" (14).
49. Schulman, review of *The Hartmann Era*, 59–63.
50. *Ibid.*, 61.
51. Viego, *Dead Subjects*, 6.
52. In fact, the term *adjustment* is also central in neoliberal policy, notably

in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programs. Tracing the World Bank's *World Development Reports* from 1978 through 1981 (available at www.openknowledge.worldbank.org), one finds that the term *adjustment* becomes increasingly prominent, as the bank focuses first on *development* (in 1978), later on *transformation* (in 1979), and finally on *adjustment* (in 1981). This latter term comes to be used in different contexts. Sometimes national economies are said to have to "adjust" to the new, high price of oil. Other times, national governments have to "adjust" their economies, denationalizing industry and expanding the free market as a condition to receive loans from the World Bank. A detailed inquiry into the circulation of the term *adjustment* across economic and psychological discourse is beyond the scope of this project but certainly could be subject to future research. Thank you to one of *Social Text*'s anonymous readers for bringing this to my attention.

53. Hooker, "Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual," 18. I use the term *homosexual* here following the norms of this medicalized, psychological discourse.

54. *Ibid.*, 21.

55. Qtd. in Bergmann, "Hartmann Era," 18.

56. Hooker, "Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual," 30.

57. Bieber et al., *Homosexuality*, 172.

58. See Minton, *Departing from Deviance*, 219–38.

59. Shannon Winnubst argues that under neoliberalism, "normative rationality recedes . . . [and] psychological interiority fades" ("Queer Thing about Neoliberal Pleasure," 87). In comparison, my reading renders visible neoliberal forms normativity.

60. See Morgan, "Family versus the State," 83–84, 117–19.

61. Friedersdorf, "New Intolerance."

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