



## The Homosexual Subject: Coming-Out as a Political Act

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*Drawing on Lacan's notion of the subject as a split and his four discursive forms, this paper identifies and examines three moments inherent to the coming out narratives. It is shown that two such moments, manifested as two forms of discourse—the hysteric's discourse and the master's discourse, open the possibility of political actions. The former adheres to a perpetual position to interrogating the established social-symbolic order, whereas, the latter completes the steps of constituting and recognizing oneself in a new master's interpellation. The author then examines the form of and limitations to the political gestures entailed by the social constructionism and queer theory concerning the coming out processes: the social constructionist's insistence on completing the master's discourse and the queer gesture of rejecting any master and keeping the symbolic-ideological space open.*

The act of coming out marks a significant phase in the formation of the homosexual subjectivity, both for the individual and for the formation of gay/lesbian communities. In social sciences and humanities, two paradigms have dominated the research of homosexuality and the formation of homosexual subjectivity and identities: the constructionist approach and queer theory (deconstructionist approach), though some more or less conventional sociological approaches such as symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical approach, and conflict theories have also fared well. Social constructionist studies of homosexuality, according to Steven Seidman (1996 p. 9), reject essentialism that locates homosexuality in human's biological makeup and directs research interests and efforts to the social factors and processes that shape the homosexual identity and community. The queer theorist on the other hand argues against any approach that remains within the symbolic space of binary social categories such as man and woman, male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality, natural and unnatural, which organize the social knowledge/power of contemporary capitalist system and are sustained through performativity-reiteration (Butler, 1993). The act of coming out thus functions differently in the two universes of social constructionism and queer theory: as a process of negotiating and constituting certain homosexual identities in the former and as a (failed) performing of social categories in the latter.

In both paradigms, the notion of subject/subjectivity is probably one of the least clearly defined concepts. In the social constructionist's works the subject is usually equated to the sense of self that is correlative to an identity occupying a certain structural position(s). The queer theorist tends to view the subject as an effect of the Althusserian interpellation (Althusser, 1971), a product of performativity of social, political, and legal powers (Butler, 1993), which hail the individual into a subject and at the same time subjects her to an order of power. The difficulty for social constructionism lies in its treatment of the coming out individual as always already homosexual who only needs to negotiate a certain identity, a membership in a community or group. For the queer theorist, the trouble inheres in the queering gesture that endeavors to de-subjectivize the subject, asserting the ever failing performative, and refusing "any positing of a proper subject" (Eng et al., 2005, p. 3). However, the result of both constructionist and deconstructionist/queer gestures turn out to be "the Thing" that is respectively either a surplus or a remainder of the two discursive acts. In other words, the constructionist gesture, which directs attention to the formation of socially constituted identities that represent new spaces of opposition to the dominant power, already presupposes that which is represented. The paradox that representation presupposes its own represented is the hidden truth of the subject apparently not noticeable to the social constructionist. On the other hand, the queer/deconstructionist gesture, in its uncompromising insistence on understanding gender-sexuality as the effects of *performativity-recitation* of social identities and their imaginary bodily images (Butler, 1993, p.12-16), leaves a remainder that is the very Thing that fails to be subjectivized. In the Lacanian framework, the surplus-product and the remainder resulted from the above two gestures are precisely the split-subject (Lacan, 1991[2007]; Fink, 1995; Žižek, 1998), which will be discussed in detail in the following section.

In this paper, I employ the Lacanian concept of the split-subject and Lacan's theory on the four discourses (Lacan, 1991[2007]; Žižek, 1998) that correspond to four forms of the subject (Žižek, 1998) to analyze a corpus of coming-out narratives collected from the Internet.<sup>1</sup> My analysis focuses on narrated experiences of youth because coming out is for them not only an extra "burden" of socialization but also an opportunity for creating new forms of subjectivity. Furthermore, the normative heterosexual masculinity is a rigid (foreclosed) hegemonic power whose grip is much stronger on male youth than men of more or less social establishment. The purpose of the analyses, however, is not to address the coming out process *per se* and its effects or outcomes and the analysis is not a systematic one that covers the full range of the corpus. Instead my focus is on the discursive modes and moments of coming out narratives and the subsequent subjective experiences of coming out individuals. Moreover, I treat coming out acts as discursive gestures that may create different political and ethical consequences. Therefore, the quotes from the narratives are only for purpose of illustration. Moreover, because both social constructionist and queer/deconstructionist approaches contain strong political motifs, I then examine the moments in the coming out process as political spaces where the constructionist and queer theoretical approaches have had their impacts. In the same Lacanian framework the political limitation of both approaches are discussed.

### *The splitting of the subject and the closet*

Lacan's (1975[1998], p. 49) thesis that the signifier represents a subject to another signifier is to be understood in terms of the correlation between the subject and the signifier. In Lacan's own words, "[T]he subject is nothing other than what slides in a chain of signifiers" (1975[1998], p. 50). The Lacanian quasi-mathematical formula  $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$  demonstrates the sliding of the signifiers, in which the meanings of  $S_1$ , the master signifier, depends on the differentiation and defERENCE in a system of knowledge, namely  $S_2$ . The subject emerges when  $S_1$  is retroactively posited as the quilting point (What Bruce Fink (2004, pp. 89-90) calls the button tie) that stops the sliding of the chain of signifiers. A good illustration at hand of this argument is the term *queer*. Contrary to what the queer theorist argues, that "queer" is a non-identity that refers to no stable social categories and thus subversive to dominant gender, sexual, and racial discourses, it nonetheless occupies a position that integrates the various marginal or transgressive gender, sexual, and racial identities that have emerged in opposition to the dominant social discourses. One lesson we can learn from the queer theorist is that precisely because the concept of queer is empty (emptied), means nothing and everything marginal and transgressive, it can serve as a master signifier. Ernesto Laclau (1996) in his well-known thesis on the death and resurrection of the theory of ideology addresses precisely the two discursive gestures in ideological hegemonization: emptying of a signifier in order for it to function as a master signifier, and equivalencing (In Lacan's words, sliding) of signifiers. Slavoj Žižek's discussion of contemporary environmentalist struggles present yet another example: contemporary environmentalism is a political arena open to ideological competition and our knowledge of environmental crises is rendered meaningful through master signifiers such as humanism, anti-capitalism (socialism), and feminism. In other words, there is no environmentalism as such. All existing environmentalisms rely on certain master signifiers such as humanist environmentalism, socialist environmentalism or feminist environmentalism (Žižek, 1996, p. 128; 1989, p. 88).

This leads to yet another crucial point in the Lacanian school: there is no other of the Other. Here the Other (with a capital O) refers to the symbolic order. "There is no other of the Other" means that there is no support that sustains the social symbolic order except through the act of stating-reiterating it (Žižek, 2005, pp. 50-1). In the field of sexuality studies, this can only mean that there is no sexuality as such. Sexuality as a domain open to social-ideological hegemonization is always already quilted by some master signifiers; for instance, the "normative" heterosexuality anchored on the institution of family, or the sexuality whose meanings depend on modern scientific knowledge. It is in this sense that the Lacanian School is fundamentally anti-essentialist. Different from the deconstructionist, the Lacanian does not reject the notion of a "hard reality" but points to the dimension of the real. The Lacanian "real" is located in the gaps between different symbolic orders, the gap between plausible perspectives (Žižek, 2006). Put differently, the Lacanian "real" refers to that which resists any signification evidenced by the irreducible gaps among various discursive constructions of reality.

Consequentially, the Lacanian subject is attached to the master signifier and the knowledge it relies on. The variations in the subject consist in the variable relations between the subject, the master signifier, and knowledge/meaning system, and the object. What is worth emphasizing here is the retroactive gesture that poses the master signifier and the consequent emergence of the subject. The master signifier is always retroactively posited, which in turn integrates a whole field of meanings so that things become what they always have been (Žižek, 1989, pp. 101-2). With regard to this argument, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) presents an excellent example. Homosexual practices, cultural symbols, and even social organizations had always existed. However, it was not until after the Stonewall revolt and the subsequent gay/lesbian movements that gay/lesbian identities started to render a whole field of knowledge in the closet publicly meaningful. In other words, gay/lesbian identities functioned as master signifiers that wove (underground) symbolic systems into one coherent set of meanings. It is within such a system that Sedgwick's argument that modern Western knowledge, literature, and arts *had always relied* on the dichotomous categories of heterosexual and homosexual is to be understood. It is also in this sense that the homosexual subject emerges as a result of gay/lesbian identities coming to integrate a set of signifiers that have always existed. It is only in retrospect that one can entertain the illusion that the homosexual subject has always been. At the personal level, this retroaction marks one crucial moment in the coming out process.

If the Lacanian subject were merely an identity whose contents are determined by its structural positions and signified features, then the so-called Lacanian subject would not be different from a constructionist or deconstructionist conception of subjectivity. The other side of the Lacanian subject can be understood in two seemingly paradoxical ways. First, it is the hard kernel of one's being that forever resists symbolic integration. In other words, I am always more than the totality of my social roles, identities, statuses, goals, and relations. There is no enumeration of my social traits that would fully represent me as a human being. Second, this hard kernel of me is at the same time the effect of exclusion that any totalizing social symbolic order has to perform to achieve its coherency. It is only when I am included in the social symbolic order that I find myself excluded at the same time. The notion of "the closet" captures precisely this other side of the Lacanian subject. No wonder Sedgwick defines closet-ness as initiated through a performance of silence (1990, p. 3). Silence here bears witness to the fact that there is something in me that is unspeakable because it is absent or suppressed within the (normative) symbolic order. Meanwhile it is precisely because of my participation in the social performance that the unspeakable Thing comes into being as the excluded.

The Lacanian subject, represented by one signifier to some other signifiers and at the same time appearing as a split between inclusion and exclusion, is then shown as follows in a Lacanian formula:

$$\frac{S_1}{\mathcal{S}} \longrightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

*Figure 1: The Lacanian subject and the master's discourse*

The lower left sign of  $\mathcal{X}$  is the Lacanian subject represented by  $S_1$ , the master signifier, to  $S_2$ , the system of knowledge hegemonized by  $S_1$ . What is worth reiterating is that the subject is always a split between the signifier (the symbolic) that represents it and suppresses it at the same time. One should be cautious not to interpret the suppressed or excluded of the symbolic order as anything substantial. The split is the suppression or exclusion as such. Regarding sexuality, the real Thing, the real object-cause of sexual desire does not exist—sexuality as such has no substantial support; actual sexualities are always the products of social symbolic order, made possible through one’s “forced” choice for or submission to the Law. It should be noted that this argument differs from the deconstructionist’s rejection of any foundation of sexuality. The thin line that separates the Lacanian from the deconstructionist is the Lacanian “real,” the fundamental antagonism of sexuality and one’s traumatic encounter with it that resists totalizing symbolic signification. In other words, sexuality is not merely some social construct *ex nihilo*. The real of sexuality is a fundamental antagonism that forever resists full signification.

*The split subject in coming out narratives*

How then is the split-subject represented in coming out narratives? Furthermore, how does the split-subject function as modalities of the coming out act? Different from the typical sociological analyses of self-identity formation through narratives and identification processes, in which the individual organizes, negotiates, and constructs stories to render her/his experiences coherent and meaningful, the Lacanian framework redirects one’s attention to the moment of the emergence of the subject and its splitting. In this section, I rely on the Lacanian framework of subjectivity and Greimas’ elementary narrative model (Greimas, 1966[1983]; Schleifer et al., 1992) to analyze a corpus of coming out narratives to address three moments in such stories.<sup>2</sup>

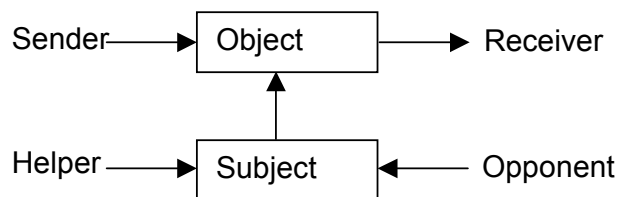


Figure 2. Greimas’ actantial model (Greimas, 1966[1983], p. 207)

The above figure represents Greimas’ elementary narrative model. Each position implies an actant or actantial role and the set of relations among the actants. In Greimasian narrative analysis, an actant is a semantic-narrative function to be actualized as actor(s) in specific stories. For instance, the actant of “opponent” in a fairytale could be actorialized as the villain or unfavorable natural elements (Greimas, 1966[1983]). This model contains three axes: the quest axis, the conflict axis, and the communication axis. The quest axis, which is indicated by the vertical line that goes from the subject to the (valued) object, gives rise to events related to

the changing relation between the subject and object. The lower half of the figure depicts the conflict axis between the narrative's external actants (i.e., namely the helper or the opponent), whose activities give rise to events that respectively facilitate and impede communication or the subject's quest.

The upper half of Figure 2 depicts the communication axis. The interactions between sender and receiver are particularly important according to Greimas (1986, but also see Schleifer et al., 1992), because they not only articulate the situation but also interject social and cultural values into the narrative. In coming-out narratives, for instance, the sender implies a community, which could either facilitate the subject's coming out process if it is tolerant, or impede the process if it is more or less homophobic. What is of particular importance in this model with regard to the Lacanian subject is the quest axis, namely, the events concerning the relations between the subject and the object. One question immediately arises from the examination of the quest axis: what is the object of the subject's quest in coming out narratives? How does the object function in the emergence of the homosexual subject?

In a sense, the coming out narrative can be viewed as one in which a "hero" seeks for a definition of the Object-Thing that defines her/him. This Object-Thing, contrary to what the constructionists assume in their analyses, is not merely a social identity out there, external to a presupposed subject. On the contrary, the coming out narratives typically starts with the narrator's recognition that there is Something in me but not transparent to me. The initial splitting between the Thing in me and the "I" that perceives and is unsettled by the Thing is the very moment of the emergence of the subject. The opacity of the Object-Thing is the defining character of the first moment of the coming out narrative in general. The following passage addresses such an inner conflict:

*I have always felt as though there was something else to me than what met the eye. I, since the seventh grade, would get a crush on a male schoolmate (every now and then) whom I thought to be cute. I never realized what those feelings really meant since I was, and still am, attracted to girls. I thought every guy was like me. — Robby*

The narrator, who self-identifies as bisexual, explicitly writes about this "something else to me than what met the eye." This "eye" is to be understood as one's imagination of the Other's gaze: how I see myself through other's eyes. Here the difference between appearance and essence is crucial. What else could this Thing be besides my "essence," the innermost yet alien trait that defines who I am? What I appear is merely a cover-up for what I really am. It would be mistaken to assume that the narrator understands what the defining Thing is at this moment, since "understanding" through signifying the Thing comes later through the act of identification—an act of submitting the Thing to the symbolic order. Because the Thing is not transparent to the narrator, it defines him, through its impervious yet irresistible drive. In the Lacanian framework the objectifying gesture that recognizes the Thing in oneself is the very first moment of the subject, which comes into experiences through positing an object: the positing gesture turns out to be the very split-subject. However, a careful reading would show that the Thing is only perceived

as being out there—the males that attracted the narrator, the boys on whom he had a crush. This is the Lacanian ex-timate (Žižek, 1989, p. 180); the core of one's being is at least partially out there standing for the object-cause of desire.

The Thing, the alien object that defines the homosexual subject, is often depicted as a lack, a hole in one's everyday routine regulated, interpreted, and supervised through the heterosexual and heterosexist symbolic order.

*[i] went through high school in what seems now like a foggy haze, that never really existed. I never drank i never did drugs, i also never talked to anyone. everyone labeled me the freak, and the guys called me a faggot, it was not until high school that i ever even heard that word. it cut through me like a hot knife in butter. that word for some reason hurt me so bad. and it only made me shelter myself more. junior year, i finally started to deal with life. — Harvey*

Different from the previous story, Harvey's narrative depicts his youth years as characteristic of a lack, an absence of activities such as drinking, doing drugs, and even talking, activities that are considered "normal" within the symbolic system of excessive heterosexual masculinity. This lack—non-participation in the symbolic order functions as the object, the Thing that distinguishes the narrator from what is perceived as normalcy. From the viewpoint of the normative heterosexual social order, the lack of signs of excessive masculinity such as drinking (underage) and doing drugs is eventually interpreted as "faggot" behaviors. The fact that heterosexual youth could be labeled as faggot bears witness to the excessive and transgressive nature of masculinity. It is in this sense that masculinity is the transgressive underside of the normative heterosexual order. In Harvey's struggles for a name of the lack he encounters what Althusser (1971) calls interpellation, an ideological call addressed at the subject. What is amazingly perspicacious about Harvey's narrative is his metaphorical description of his feelings when called a "freak" and "faggot"—"it cut through me like a hot knife in butter." Is this not the most illustrative picture of the Lacanian subject, a cutting that separates the individual from his un-reflected existence, an accusation addressed at one who is always already "guilty," an injurious objectifying gesture that brings into being the subject as a cut? Hence, the emergence of the homosexual subject involves an objectifying gesture, which unfolds along the quest axis within the Greimasian narrative model. It is also this initial moment of subjectivization-objectification that gives rise to the events along the conflict and communication axis, namely, the coming out processes.

#### *The retroactive positing of the homosexual master signifiers*

From the quotes in the last section, it is seen that the subject emerges in accompany with the alien Thing with which the subject has to grapple. In this section I intend to show that it is through strife for a name of the alien Thing that the subject undergoes the process of coming out—a process of identification. In the Greimasian model, this means that events will unfold along the conflict and communication axes, oftentimes with the two axes merged as one when the "community" refuses to accept the narrator's newly claimed identity and its message is rejection. Two

discursive forms mark the two crucial moments of the coming out process: the hysteric's discourse and the master's discourse, which, as I will argue later, present two political gestures implied in constructionism and deconstructionism/queer theory.

In Figure 2 presented above, the quest axis in the narrative model characterizes an inner split of the individual, and the quest of the protagonist in coming out narratives is primarily one for bridging (erasing) the gap between the subject and the object. It should be stated here that the Lacanian position on the issue of subjectivization is that the subject, once emerged, never recovers from the cut. To be more precise, the cut is the subject whose wound can be concealed under a master signifier once a decision of submission to the symbolic is made. Thus for the Lacanian, identification always involves a conscious decision, which opens the space for political and ethical actions. The immediate question following this argument is, "what if one rejects the master signifier presented to her/him?" In other words and to be more specific, what if one refuses to identify with the master signifiers immediately available and embraces one's objectness? The answer lies in one of Lacan's four discourses (Lacan, 1991[2007]; Žižek, 1998): the hysteric's discourse.

$$\frac{\mathcal{S}}{a} \longrightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

Figure 3 Lacan's hysteric's discourse

The hysteric's discourse proposed by Lacan in his seminar XVII depicts a form of discourse in which the subject addresses a question to the Master (understood as the dominant symbolic order): why am I what you say I am? The small *a* in the lower left corner of the figure is Lacan's infamous *objet petit a* (the small object of *a*), which stands for the very object-cause of one's desire, the core of one's being that resists signification, the "je ne sais quoi" that defines me as unique (Lacan, 1991[2007]). In the coming out narratives this marks the second moment of the process, the moment when the narrator directs her/his question at the dominant heterosexual social symbolic order: why am I what you say I should be?

*Kids used to tease each other so carelessly by saying "that's so gay!" or "get away, gay fag!". Truth be told, I also said those words at times. But I didn't know it applied to my sexuality. When I got into 6th grade, I realized that I was different, but not gay. I remember walking down the halls and seeing the football players making out with the most popular girls. The guys holding hands with their girls. But never once did I see two guys enjoying a kiss, or even holding hands. I always felt like I was different and rare at the age of 12. I went around acting the straightest I could. When I was with my family out in public, I would stare at a beautiful woman for no reason other than to make myself look straight. And later that day, I would cry myself to sleep, asking God with tears why I was the way I was. — David*

The above passage, a rare detailed account of one's experiences before coming out in the collection of narratives, clearly illustrates the relations between the dominant

heterosexist social symbolic order and the homosexual subject that rejects the name “gay fag” perceived as part of the symbolic universe. What is noteworthy is the fact that later in his life the narrator does embrace the identity of gay when the same identity is perceived as belonging to a different social symbolic order, the assertive and affirmative gay/lesbian discourses. However, at the point of his life quoted above, the narrator associates the same identity, namely “gay fag” with the heterosexist discourse according to which he is forced to act. The fundamental difference between the two symbolic orders lies in the position the gay identity occupies: in the heterosexist order the gay identity serves as the other of the heterosexist subject, as the negative support of the order; whereas in the second, the assertive and affirmative gay/lesbian discourses, the gay identity is the master signifier that anchors an alternative symbolic network. In David’s narration above, however, his painful struggle starts with his questioning of the first symbolic order: asking God why I was the way I was. Here God stands in the place of the master signifier as the Master, or the big Other in Lacanian terms. “The way I was” is to be understood as “the way you said I was.” This is exemplary of Lacan’s discourse of the hysteric in which the hysteric subject hystericizes the Master, in this case, God. That is to say, in the hysteric’s discourse, the subject returns her/his internal split back to the Master: I am your creation against your own will. For those who are not acquainted with Lacanian works, it is worth indicating that the concept “hysteric” here ought not to be taken as diagnose of mental pathology. Instead, it is a form of social interaction whose function is precisely to hystericize the Master, to displace the master to the position of the other (the upper right position in Figures 1 and 3) from the agent’s position (upper left). By occupying the agent’s position, the hysteric effectively places the Master to the impotent position of the other, and any gesture of outrage or violence (gay bashing for example) bears further witness to the fact that the Master has lost its power as virtual coercion. From the perspective of the subject, this discursive gesture is a rejection of the imposed identity, a refusal to recognize the interpellation. This is the moment of the pure Lacanian subject, a split as such, a gesture of negation that cannot be grounded in any (pathological) rational calculation. This is also what it means to reject the Master signifier.

Then comes the final moment of the coming out process, when the gay/lesbian identity is accepted as the master signifier of a new symbolic order. The instability of the hysteric’s discourse is replaced by a normalized affirmative gay/lesbian discourse. In the master’s discourse (see Figure 1), the split subject recognizes him/herself in the master signifier ( $S_1$ ) and its related meaning-knowledge system ( $S_2$ ). What is produced (Lacan names the lower right position the product of the discourse) is the small object of  $a$  with which the subject now entertains a fantasmic relation: even though I have submitted myself to the master I can retrieve my object-cause of desire, the very core of my *jouissance* from the symbolic. According to Žižek (1993, pp. 165; 185) “the wound is healed only by the spear that smote you”; that is to say, the cut or the pure hysteric subject can only be healed by words, the symbolic.

The following quote is from one of those longer stories in the collection. Having struggled with his desire for men, which, Dave the narrator admits, was initially not framed sexually, he finally decided to come out, which he prefers to call “thawed out.”

*In any case, I never really "came out" to myself so much as "thawed out". I remember seeing a booth for the campus g/l/b/t group my freshmen year and wanting to go up and talk to them; that was really the first time I'd ever put the 'G' word to my feelings. It wasn't until the next year that I was finally ready to make the leap from 'out to myself' to 'out'. I began corresponding very candidly with my sexuality professor about gay issues, and she was incredibly supportive. I met a few other gay people, and finally decided I had to tell my friends. I began with my best friend -- we worked at the same place, so I showed up just before he closed one night and dropped off a letter (it literally had, among other great lines, 'I'M GAY!' in about 72 point font). — Dave*

The crucial moment in the above narrative is the moment when Dave “puts the ‘G’ word to his feelings,” a transition from the hysteric’s discourse to the master’s discourse. In this transition, the subject retroactively posits a master signifier to render his experiences coherently meaningful. The G-word functions as the signifier that stops the sliding of other signifiers in the subject’s universe and integrates the fragments of the subject’s experiences. Once this positing gesture is completed, the subject’s world becomes what it always has been. This is why in most of the coming out narratives that address pre-coming-out experiences the narrators never fail to mention that they always knew they were gay, some tracing their homosexual awakenings back to kindergarten year. This “always knowing what one is” is not to be taken literally; it ought to be understood as an effect of positing a master signifier. In the following quote, the narrator explicitly distinguishes her sexual awakening from her homosexual awareness, which occurs after her first lesbian encounter.

*I am 18, and as I grasp this issue of homosexuality, I realize that it is something I always knew, sort of a silent understanding with myself, but life went on, and growing up I never made it a big issue. I felt different from a very early age, but then again, I never knew what it was like to be very normal anyway, so I figure that I didn't miss much. .... I had already had my slew of boyfriends... always looking for something that I suppose would never be there. Then I had my first lesbian experience, and I finally admitted to myself that I was gay. — Abbie*

In Abbie’s world, there has not been much turmoil in her early sexual life, at least not in her story. However, she feels different and looks for something that is never there until her first lesbian experience. Once she admits to herself that she is gay, all the past hazy experiences, her indifference to her slew of boyfriends, and the lack or void she has felt in her relationships all of sudden achieves meaning. Again, the master signifier “gay” leads to her realization that she has always been gay. At the moments of coming out—whether it be coming out to oneself, or coming out to family, friends, relatives, and co-workers the superimposition of a gay/lesbian/queer identity functions as a point of transsubstantiation that constitutes a new world of substances.

### *Coming out as a political act*

Three moments of the homosexual subject are identified in the above analysis of coming out narratives: the initial splitting between the subject and the object, the hysteric's discourse that questions the master *qua* symbolic order, and the submission to a "new" master registered in a master's discourse. While the first moment is essential to the origin of any subjectivity, it is a conscious choice for the subject to remain in a perpetual position to interrogate the master or to recognize oneself in a new symbolic order. Regarding the master's discourse, there is yet another option as to which master to choose. At each moment, the possibility of political-ethical actions is opened. The political choices implied in social constructionism and queer theory can be located in such a framework of subjectivity.

Social constructionism opts for the last moment—the moment of identification with the emerging gay/lesbian discourses that strive for justice, equality, and tolerance, and hence asserts the coming out act as a necessary political step that transcends the closet (Seidman, 2002). What the social constructionist fails to recognize is precisely the inefficacy of the approach in changing the fundamental symbolic coordinates of the social universe that organize our public and private lives, our realities and fantasies. If homosexuality has always been the disavowed underside of the heterosexual-heterosexist social order, it functions in the fantasmic domain. In other words, precisely because heterosexuals also fantasize homosexual scenarios, such fantasies have to be denied and rejected as those of the other. For instance, the most vivid picturesque scenes imagined about gay men being pedophiles luring our innocent children into the most despicable sexual acts are provided by those religious leaders and politicians who express the strongest outrage about the moral decadence of our times. It is in this sense that the visibility of the gay/lesbian communities created through coming out acts appears to be just a new form of closet, though a visible one. No wonder such visible closets are only possible within the frame of multiculturalist tolerance: what is to be tolerated, from the heterosexual and heterosexist point of view, is precisely their perceived excessive *jouissance* (enjoyment) that has always served and continues to serve as the underside of the heterosexist order.

Queer theory, in its many versions, is fundamentally ambiguous with regard to politics. On one hand, queer theory's insistence on keeping its master signifier "queer" empty—contingent and open, can be viewed as a discursive gesture of persevering in the Lacanian hysteric's discourse: why am I what you say I am? Here the queer subject asserts that I am nothing and I am everything; I am the very Thing that questions any interpellations, and I am impenetrable because there is nothing to penetrate. It is in this sense that the queer gesture is ethical, free of any pathological concerns in the Kantian sense, a pure gesture of negation without weighing between means and ends. Its apparent political inefficacy precisely consists in its effectiveness in interrogating the fundamental coordinates of the dominant gender sexual regime. On the other hand, to sustain such a position, queer theory resorts to a theatrical participation in the patriarchal-heterosexist socio-symbolic order, highlighting the failure and contradictions inherent in its performativity, which is evidenced by the queer theorist's fascination with drag performance (for instance,

Butler, 1993). The danger lies in the ambivalence of the discursive form: the agent may shift from the split subject to an embodiment of the object of desire for the heterosexual subject's gaze, as Butler has already recognized in terms of a possible "reidealization of the hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (Butler, 1993, p. 125). This new discourse is what Lacan calls the analyst's discourse as shown in the following figure.

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \longrightarrow \frac{\mathcal{S}}{S_1}$$

Figure 4: Lacan's analyst's discourse

It is Žižek who points out that "the mathem of the discourse of perversion is the same as that of the analyst's discourse" (Žižek, 1998, p. 80). Lacan's notion of perversion contains the pseudo mathematical formula of an inverted fantasy as shown in the upper level of Figure 4:  $a \rightarrow \mathcal{S}$ , in which the small object of  $a$ , the object-cause of desire takes the agent's position (upper left), and presents itself as the instrument of the other's enjoyment. The thin line that distinguishes the discourse of perversion from the analyst's discourse is the gesture of instrumentalization: while the pervert presents him/herself as the tool-object for other's pleasure, the analyst stands for the very void of the object sustained by fantasy. The queer gesture, for instance drag show, is fundamentally ambiguous precisely because the drag queen occupies the discursive position of agent as pervert when he offers himself as an object of pleasure or analyst when he presents not what he fakes but his faking as such. Despite the queer theorist's emphasis on her/his role as social analyst, as the stand-in for the gap within the illusory lure of the heterosexual object of desire, the position is nonetheless ambiguous: it entertains the very illusory object of enjoyment that it sets out to subvert.

It can be seen from the above discussion that queer theory entails two discursive gestures: the hysteric's perpetual questioning and the analyst's subversion. The first gesture, the rejection of any normalized social categories, is perceived as politically inefficacious since political ideological hegemony demands master signifiers that quilt the otherwise fragmented fields of meaning-reality. At the same time, the second gesture, because of its ambiguity, easily functions as the obscene underside of the dominant heterosexist symbolic order. Even though queer theory can be perceived as politically ineffective and suffers from the risk of being instrumentalized as a support for the heterosexist order, in principle, it can still be viewed as an ethical act, a continual negation of normalization.

In light of the analysis in the previous sections, the queer gesture insists on the second moment of the coming out act and resists the temptation to take the last step, leaving the emergent symbolic space open and refusing to foreclose it with some other master signifiers. It is in this sense that the queer gesture renders the more or less established coming out act problematic. Although the coming out act is in reality effective politically as the act itself has become considerably pragmatic in its calculation of whether, when, how, and to whom one comes out (Vargo, 1998), it nonetheless relies on clearly defined gay/lesbian identities, which the queer theorist views as always normalized, regulative, and suppressive. In her review of Jan

Clausen's ("a long time lesbian, activist, and poet") autobiography on her twice coming out—coming out as lesbian first and coming out as heterosexual woman later, Jolly (2001) perspicaciously points out that "Clausen's autobiography dramatizes the structural contradictions in the coming out model of life story" (p. 479). Citing Fuss (1991) Jolly further states that a tension inheres in the inside-outside model of gay and lesbian identity "between that which is always there (but has been buried under layers of cultural suppression) and that which has never been socially permitted (but remains to be formed, created, or achieved)" (Jolly, 1991, p. 479). This seems to be the very point at which the limit of the coming out model as politics is reached. If Clausen's autobiography addresses the issue of discipline within the gay/lesbian communities, which have become more or less suppressive, a brief examination of the relations between the heterosexual-heterosexist and the gay/lesbian universes will surely shed more light on the limitation of the constructionist approach.

Of the many species we know now of the genus of human sexuality—heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and so on, heterosexuality as a species had always functioned as the stand-in for the genus while other forms of sexuality, homosexuality in particular, had been viewed as perverted sexualities. Once a normalized symbolic order of homosexuality and the community that sustains it have emerged as competitor (since 1980's), changes have taken place not in the relative positions of heterosexuality and other forms of sexuality, but precisely in the notion of sexuality itself. Heterosexuality has been withdrawn from the very notion of sexuality into a less visible territory of sex and sex behavior. Therefore, issues of sexuality or sexual orientation, whether they are political, social, or academic, are always issues of homosexuality or homosexual orientation. In our times, homosexuality as a species of human sexuality has started to occupy the position of the genus of sexuality and consequently, heterosexuality is, if still sexuality, not a sexual orientation. Now heterosexuality serves as the background of normalcy against which other forms of sexuality are foregrounded as sexuality. The causes of such change cannot be found within the multicultural social constructionist gay/lesbian movements alone; instead they have to be located in the domains where the contemporary capitalist system expands, incorporates, and defines the dimensions and coordinates of identity politics. This is probably why the queer theorist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still feels the need to reiterate their fundamental political position to "reject a 'minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal'" (Eng et al., 2005 p. 3, quoting Warner, 1993).

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I first discussed three moments inherent to the coming out narratives in terms of Lacan's notion of the subject and four discursive forms. It is shown that two such moments, manifested as two forms of discourse—the hysteric's discourse and the master's discourse, open the possibility of political actions. Within such a framework I then examined the political gestures entailed by the social constructionism and queer theory concerning the coming out processes: the social constructionist's insistence on completing the master's discourse and the queer gesture of rejecting any master. At this point, I would like to further state that

precisely because of the constructionist's strategy of identification and her/his dependency on establishing and established identities, her/his political actions have taken place within the frame of the globalized capitalist system whose fundamental social coordinates remain unchallenged. In other words, the void as the possibility of universal opened at the moment of the hysteric's discourse ends up in particular identities, which forecloses possible forms of politics anchored on universal struggles. The queer theorist, although her/his political approaches are often criticized for being ineffective, has nonetheless kept the political future open, insisting on the possible universal. It should be recognized, however, that the politics implied by queer theory is at least effective in one respect: its way of subverting the excessive and transgressive masculinity that functions as the disciplinary underside of the normative heterosexual order. Instead of confronting head to head the often violent reincarnation of the fantasmic object of masculinity, the queer gesture of mocking and faking it directly disturbs the fantasy.

Maybe Lacan's thesis that there is no sexual relationship (*rapport*) could shed some light here. What Lacan means is that sex does not form social bonds (Libbrecht, 2001). On the contrary, the social symbolic makes sexual relationship possible and thus there is no sexual relationship as such. It is in this sense that communities based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientations are founded on a certain fetishized object often claimed as the authentic core of one's being. What is lost in such segmented identity communities grounded on their "constructed" particularities is precisely the dimension of the universal, forms of politics that have started to fade out of our horizon. Instead of remaining attached to the fundamental fantasy of the lost object of *jouissance* and the possibility of retrieving it (in the name of liberation, for instance), the real liberation may lie elsewhere, in a new form of intersubjectivity free from fetishistic illusions.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This collection of coming out narratives are available on the Internet at: <http://www.rslevinson.com/gaylesissues/comingoutstories/blcoming.htm>  
It should be restated here that no systematic narrative analysis is intended to address the entirety of the corpus. Instead, passages are quoted to illustrate the moments in the rise of the homosexual subject.

<sup>2</sup> The importance of Greimas' model for this paper lies in the fact that this model centers on the quest axis along which a subject seeks for an object. In light of the Lacanian framework, one reasonable question we may address to Greimas is, "What if the object in the model does not exist out there." The Lacanian answer is, of course, there is a split.

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