

ABIGAIL C. SAGUY

COME OUT, COME OUT,  
WHOEVER YOU ARE



Come Out, Come Out,  
Whoever You Are



# Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are

ABIGAIL C. SAGUY

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Abigail Saguy 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress  
ISBN 978-0-19-093166-7 (pbk.)  
ISBN 978-0-19-093165-0 (hbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by LSC Communications, United States of America  
Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

*For Claire and Jonah*



# Contents

<i>About the Authors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1. Introduction	1
2. Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are <i>With Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer</i>	10
3. Coming Out of Glass Closets	30
4. Overcoming Fear <i>With Laura E. Enriquez</i>	44
5. Producing a Sense of Linked Fate <i>With Nicole Iturriaga</i>	68
6. Airing Dirty Laundry and Squealing on Pigs	83
7. Conclusion	111
<i>Notes</i>	135
<i>Sources Cited</i>	157
<i>Index</i>	171



# About the Authors

**Abigail C. Saguy** is professor of sociology with a courtesy appointment in the Department of Gender Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

**Laura E. Enriquez** is assistant professor of Chicano/Latino Studies at the University of California, Irvine.

**Nicole Iturriaga** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen, Germany.

**Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer** is assistant professor of American and Gender Studies at the University of Bordeaux, Montaigne.



# Preface

This book is about how and why people use the concept of coming out as a certain kind of person to resist stigma and collectively mobilize for social change. It is about how metaphors like that of coming out evolve as people adopt them for varying purposes—across time, space, and social context. There have been countless books written on coming out but—whether fiction, academic, or memoir—almost all of them focus on the experience of gay men and lesbians in the United States. This is the first book to examine how a variety of people and groups use the concept of coming out in new and creative ways. It examines how the use of coming out among American lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) people has shifted over time. It also examines how four diverse US social movements—the fat acceptance movement, the undocumented immigrant youth movement, the plural-marriage family movement among Mormon fundamentalist polygamists, and the #MeToo movement—have employed the concept of coming out to advance their cause. Doing so sheds light on these particular struggles for social recognition while also illuminating broader questions regarding social change, cultural meaning, and collective mobilization.

The idea to trace the use of the concept of coming out across different social contexts came to me when I was doing research for my previous book, *What's Wrong with Fat?* (Oxford, 2013). As part of this research, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with leading activists in the fat acceptance movement—a social movement that promotes appreciation of body size diversity and confronts weight-based stigma and discrimination. In one of the very first of these interviews, in response to a question I asked about how she got involved in fat acceptance activism, eminent fat liberation activist and author Marilyn Wann spontaneously began telling me her coming-out-as-fat story. I was struck by her choice of language—that she spoke about *coming out as fat*—and soon found that other fat acceptance activists used this same phrasing. I wondered: Why talk of “coming out as fat” as opposed to, say, simply “getting involved with fat rights activism”? What was being accomplished by using the concept of coming out—so tightly associated with LGBTQ+ activism? Did it mean the same thing in this context? Coming

out as gay, for instance, often means disclosing an unknown fact about oneself, but is it not obvious when one is very fat? What, if anything, is being disclosed? I put these questions aside for a while, as I pursued other questions related to disputes over the medical, political, and social meaning of fatness. Ultimately, however, I returned to these questions, publishing (with Anna Ward—then a graduate student in the UCLA Department of Gender Studies who helped with the literature review for that paper) “Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma” in *Social Psychology Quarterly* in 2011. Chapter 3 draws on this article.

As I was working on this paper, I discovered—talking to UCLA graduate students—additional cases in which a variety of people were using the language of coming out to resist stigma and mobilize for social change. Nicole Iturriaga had written a senior thesis at UC-Berkeley about Mormon fundamentalist polygamists and told me that they too spoke of coming out as polygamist. Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer suggested that a comparison between how gay men and lesbians in France talk about coming out with how gay men and lesbians living in the United States discuss it. Michael also told me to talk to Laura E. Enriquez, who was studying the undocumented immigrant youth movement, where there were flyers and events focused on “coming out as undocumented and unafraid.” Finally, Rebecca DiBennardo reported that adult children of gay men and lesbians have their own coming out stories as people with one or more gay parents.

From 2011 to 2013, the five of us met weekly to create a joint interview guide, discuss coding strategies and emerging findings, and workshop drafts of four stand-alone articles—published in the subsequent years.<sup>1</sup> Parts of Chapters 2, 4, and 5 draw on interviews and analyses in these previously published articles. Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, Laura E. Enriquez, and Nicole Iturriaga conducted all the interviews with the gay men and women (we only use the ones with Americans in this book), undocumented immigrant youth, and Mormon fundamentalist polygamist activists, respectively. I am grateful to all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this research. While Rebecca DiBennardo and I ultimately decided that the interviews with people who have at least one lesbian, gay, or queer parent required a different kind of analysis and were not a good fit for this book, the book has benefited from the valuable insights Rebecca DiBennardo provided as part of the original research team.

An anonymous reviewer for Oxford University Press suggested that I add a chapter on the #MeToo movement, which emerged after I submitted a

book proposal and sample drafts. I am grateful for this suggestion, which has allowed me to extend my early and ongoing research on sexual harassment.<sup>2</sup> The Oxford reviewers and editor James Cook made several other helpful suggestions during the review process, for which I am most grateful. My literary agent, Jill Marsal, read every chapter of the book and provided brilliant feedback, for which I am deeply grateful. Ian Patrick patiently worked with me over several sketches to create the beautiful original illustration on the book cover.

As I was writing the conclusion to the book, UCLA Gender Studies professor Juliet A. Williams and I were conducting interviews with leading LGBTQ+ rights activists for another research project. While we had no questions about coming out in our interview guide, several people spoke spontaneously about the political importance of coming out and shared their own coming out experiences. I am grateful to Juliet for encouraging me to use this material in the conclusion to this book. More generally, I am grateful to Juliet for providing me with intellectual inspiration, support, and camaraderie over the past several years, as well as for helpful comments on several of the chapters in this book. All of my work is better thanks to our ongoing conversation about gender, sexuality, culture, and politics. Juliet has also made the process of research and writing more fun. I am lucky indeed to have Juliet as a colleague and friend.

The analysis presented in this book benefited from feedback on earlier co-authored articles. Specifically, Jeffrey Alexander, Jessica Cattelino, Lieba Faier, Hannah Landecker, Purnima Mankekar, Damon Mayrl, Paul McLean, Vilma Ortiz, Gabriel Rossman, David Paternotte, Thomas Pineros-Shields, Adam Slez, Bruce Western, and anonymous reviewers from the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, *Social Problems*, and *Sociological Forum* offered helpful feedback on at least one book chapter. Gabriel Rossman consistently communicated his interest for this project, forwarding me countless instances of coming out. I regret that I could not systematically explore them all in this book. Christine Williams generously read an earlier version of this manuscript and provided insightful comments that inspired important revisions to Chapter 6 and the Conclusion. Several colleagues expressed enthusiasm for the project idea, cheering me on when I was having doubts. This helped keep me on track and for that I am most grateful. Rachel Lee has been a longtime supporter of this project, and as the director of the UCLA Center for the Study of Women (CSW), generously organized a colloquium on the topic in February 2016. James Schultz was tasked as respondent, and this

book benefited enormously from his comments as well as from comments from Kristen Schilt, who presented related work at the symposium. Chan-Mi Lee provided research assistance.

I could not have finished writing this book if former Sociology chair Darnell Hunt and former Social Science dean Laura Gomez had not both approved my request for a sabbatical leave for the full 2017–2018 academic year. The UCLA Academic Senate Council on Research and several UCLA centers—including the Center for American Politics and Public Policy, the Center for European and Eurasian Studies, and the Center for the Study of Women—provided essential funding for this research. The National Science Foundation (grant #1734340) is funding the research I am doing with Juliet A. Williams, on which I draw in the conclusion to this book.

Finally, I am grateful to my friends and family—including my late father Charles W. Smith, my mother Rita Cope Smith, my brother Jonathan Cope Smith, and my extended family and in-laws—for their loving support. I benefited from several conversations I had with my father—a fellow sociologist—about this project before he died on May 31, 2017. He continues to influence me in myriad positive ways, despite his painful absence.

After 26 years of marriage, my husband Dotan Saguy continues to encourage me when I falter and celebrate my triumphs. Dotan—who is having a second career as a photographer<sup>3</sup>—conceptualized the design of the book cover and worked with Oxford and Ian Patrick to execute it. In winter 2018, Dotan convinced me—despite my better judgment—to welcome an 8-week-old puppy into our home. Not initially a dog person, I am now smitten with this little being whom we call Beau and am grateful that Dotan pushed me beyond my comfort zone. I dedicate this book to my teenage children, Claire and Jonah, who continue to surprise and delight me. I hope that they will come into their most authentic selves and help make this a more just, equitable, and kind world.

# 1

## Introduction

“Come out! Come out! Wherever you are!” I bellowed after counting to 100. Despite my order, I knew that none of my playmates would reveal themselves willingly. I was 6 years old and playing the popular game of hide and seek. As seeker, my job was to find the others. Theirs was to stay hidden at all costs. The first one found would be the next seeker. The last one found would be the winner of that round.

In contrast, in the 1970s, gay rights activists discovered that coming out could offer a key to greater social acceptance and civil rights. In 1978, openly gay elected government official Harvey Milk famously made “Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are” the slogan of his campaign to defeat the Briggs Initiative, or Proposition 6, which would have banned gay teachers from working in public schools in California. The idea was that if enough gay men and lesbians told their friends they were gay, Californians would realize that they had friends, co-workers, and family members who are gay and—out of solidarity—would oppose the proposition.<sup>1</sup> Harvey Milk implored gay men and lesbians:

Come out to your relatives . . . come out to your friends . . . if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors . . . to your fellow workers . . . to the people who work where you eat and shop. . . . Come out only to the people you know, and who know you. Not to anyone else. But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake. For the sake of the youngsters who are becoming scared.

The campaign helped defeat the initiative.

Since then, coming out—as a cultural concept and political tactic—has spread within and well beyond gay rights activism. A search for the terms *coming out* and *closet* in the keywords of major papers, indexed by Lexis-Nexis, yields examples of people coming out as asexual, celibates, male heterosexuals, Jews, Republicans, Scots, Kiwi males, witches (coming out of “broom closets”!), shopaholics, minivan aficionados, slackers, knitters,

homemakers, Christian musicians, and men with erectile dysfunction.<sup>2</sup> The undocumented immigrant youth movement has used the idea to encourage undocumented immigrant youth—who fear the consequences about being open about their immigrant status—to “come out of the shadows” as “undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic,” which has, in turn, helped shift popular understandings of undocumented immigrants. More recently, the #MeToo movement has encouraged people not only to come out as having experienced sexual harassment, assault, or rape but also to *out* their abusers—resulting in material implications for many of those accused and a shift in public attitudes about harassment, assault, and rape.

This book is about how and why folks “come out” as specific kinds of people and the various forms this takes across different identities. It examines the distinct social and political implications for the specific groups that come out and for the broader society. This book assesses how the term’s origins in the gay rights movement inform what it means to “come out” as, say, fat, undocumented, or Mormon fundamentalist polygamists. It shows that identity-based movements, in responding to oppression and advocating for rights, challenge negative stereotypes and sometimes seek to overcome internalized shame. This can involve reclaiming stigmatized terms such as *black*, *queer*, *dyke*, *fat*, or *slut*. It can also involve groups using new terms, such as *undocumented*, *DREAMers*, or *plural-marriage families*. Both approaches represent attempts to counter stigma and discrimination, while pursuing a desire to have one’s authentic self recognized and valued.<sup>3</sup>

The close association of *coming out* with gay people informs the term even when it is used in other contexts. For instance, when fat liberation activist Marilyn Wann speaks about how she “came out” as fat, she is not just speaking about a turning point in her personal biography when she decided to politicize her body size. She is also staking a broader claim about what it means to be fat. Simply by using the term *coming out*, she implies that being fat is like being gay and that, just as it is good to be “out and proud” regarding one’s gayness, so it is good to be “out and proud” about one’s fatness. In this context, in which social stigma—or unwanted difference<sup>4</sup>—is plainly visible rather than hidden, coming out as fat means *owning* one’s fatness or *refusing to apologize* for it.<sup>5</sup>

This book points to how social movement tactics travel between and among different movements, and how different causes—while seemingly distinct—get connected through political strategies and rhetoric. For instance, the civil rights movement—centered on racism and racial equality—provided legal

tools, political strategies, and language for the women's rights and gay rights movements, which followed in its wake.<sup>6</sup> In the 19th century, the abolitionist movement inspired a women's rights and suffrage movement. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was originally conceived to address employment discrimination on the basis of race, was extended—through the legislative process—to also prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex.<sup>7</sup> In subsequent decades, these actions provided feminist legal activists with the basis to develop a robust body of case law on gender discrimination and sexual harassment.<sup>8</sup> Feminists in the 1970s adopted many of the same political strategies—from sit-ins to marches—used in the civil rights movement, in which many had taken part. Even the term *sexism* was inspired by the earlier term *racism*.

The way various social movements have drawn on coming out politics—originally developed in the gay rights movement—is a more recent example of this same phenomenon. By the 1970s, the gay rights movement showed that by coming out to their friends and co-workers, gay men and lesbians could change hearts, minds, and laws. Since then, other groups have used the same strategy to gain sympathy for their cause while also implicitly likening themselves to members of sexual minorities—the group most associated with this tactic. Just as Harvey Milk urged gay men and lesbians to overcome their fear of disclosure and provide a model for “youngsters who are becoming scared,” so too the undocumented immigrant youth movement has used talk of coming out as undocumented and *unafraid* to mobilize fearful constituents by trying to change their deepest feelings.

In other words, coming out has become what sociologists call a “master frame,” or a way of understanding the world that is sufficiently elastic and inclusive that a wide range of social movements can use it in their own campaigns.<sup>9</sup> The equal rights and opportunities frame is one such master frame, originally developed in the US civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and since deployed by countless other movements. Coming out is another master frame. This book is about how and why it has proven so powerful and how it has evolved as it has been used in distinct ways across different social contexts.

This book also addresses the process by which the concept of coming out has diffused beyond the gay rights movement. Work by social movement scholars suggests that social movement tactics are most likely to travel between movements that have common members or whose members are connected through social networks.<sup>10</sup> Both the fat rights movement and the

undocumented immigrant youth movements have members who identify as lesbian or queer themselves or are connected to gay rights activists, links that would be expected to facilitate diffusion of talk of “coming out” from gay-rights to these contexts.<sup>11</sup> Yet other groups—such as Mormon fundamentalist polygamists—are, for reasons that are examined in Chapter 5 engaging in coming out politics despite being largely disconnected from gay rights activists. Moreover, by likening themselves to gay men and lesbians, a few develop feelings of solidarity and a sense of linked fate with gay men and lesbians despite religious opposition to homosexuality.

Scholarship on identity politics tends to focus on single issues or identities or to address the topic in abstract terms that are not grounded in empirical research. In contrast, this book takes a broad view, covering groups as varied as gay rights activists, fat rights activists, undocumented immigrant youth activists, Mormon fundamentalist polygamist activists, and people denouncing sexual violence. This book teases out important differences across these disparate groups while also noting commonalities. It grounds this wide-ranging discussion in careful empirical research conducted over several years. Specifically, this book draws on participant observation, textual analysis, and a total of 146 in-depth interviews.<sup>12</sup> All interviews were transcribed verbatim and interview excerpts were lightly edited for clarity. I identify by first and last name those people who requested this—typically public figures, prominent activists, or authors. I refer to all others with pseudonyms, using first names only.

Before examining how the concept of coming out has moved beyond the gay rights movement, evolving in the process, the next chapter—Chapter 2, *Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are*—shows how gay men in pre-World War II urban communities first spoke of coming out *into* gay society.<sup>13</sup> By the 1970s, that coming out had become a political tactic in which gay men and lesbians revealed their sexual orientation to friends, neighbors, and co-workers or—in the case of celebrities—more publicly via the mass media in an effort to challenge harmful stereotypes and gain sympathy. This helped establish an identifiable group of people that could be legitimately categorized as a minority group, following the adoption of the civil rights movement model of activism.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter 2 examines the ways, in the 1980s and 1990s, coming out was set up in explicit relation to the metaphor of the closet, conveying the shame associated with hiding one’s homosexuality. It examines how the mantra “Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are,” used by lesbian and gay activists

in the 1980s and 1990s, became as much a demand for gay men and lesbians to declare their sexual orientation as an assurance of safety and community—bringing forth the notion of the “closet case” and the tactic of “outing.” The *closet case* is a term of derision for someone who hides his or her sexuality; *outing* is publicly exposing those who are in the closet (usually people in the public eye such as politicians and celebrities). Chapter 2 also considers various criticisms of the imperative to come out and reviews assertions that gay men and lesbians have moved “beyond the closet,”<sup>15</sup> while suggesting that the closet may also be moving beyond sexual orientation—the topic of subsequent chapters.

Coming out as gay to family and friends can help other people realize that they already know and like people who are gay. But what if one’s difference is hyper visible? Chapter 3, *Coming Out of Glass Closets*, examines this question, focusing on the case of coming out as fat. We learn that talk of coming out as fat originated with fat lesbian feminists, who were already steeped in talk of coming out as lesbian and extrapolated from that experience to talk of coming out as fat. We learn that coming out as fat is less about disclosing one’s fatness than refusing to downplay one’s weight in the hopes that others will not notice it. It means politicizing body size in order to challenge negative stereotypes. If fat people are apologetic about their size or refuse to identify as fat (“I’m a thin person trapped in this fat body”), they are unlikely to challenge negative stereotypes that others have of fat people. If, in contrast, they refuse to apologize for their weight and embrace it as part of their identity, they are more likely to stand up against weight-based oppression. Herein lies the political potential of coming out.

Considering what it means to come out as fat opens a broader question about the role visibility plays in coming out generally. We typically speak of coming out as gay or lesbian to refer to revealing to family and friends (or others) that one is gay. This is what Harvey Milk had in mind when he urged people to come out. Yet many people—particularly those who are gender nonconforming—may be assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be gay or lesbian. Effeminate men, for instance, are often assumed to be gay, while masculine-presenting women may be presumed to be lesbian. Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick uses the term *glass closet* to refer to people whose gender nonconformity makes them visibly gay despite failed attempts to conceal their sexual orientation.<sup>16</sup> Stated differently, coming out has never been *only* about revealing a hidden identity. It is about *proudly* claiming this identity.