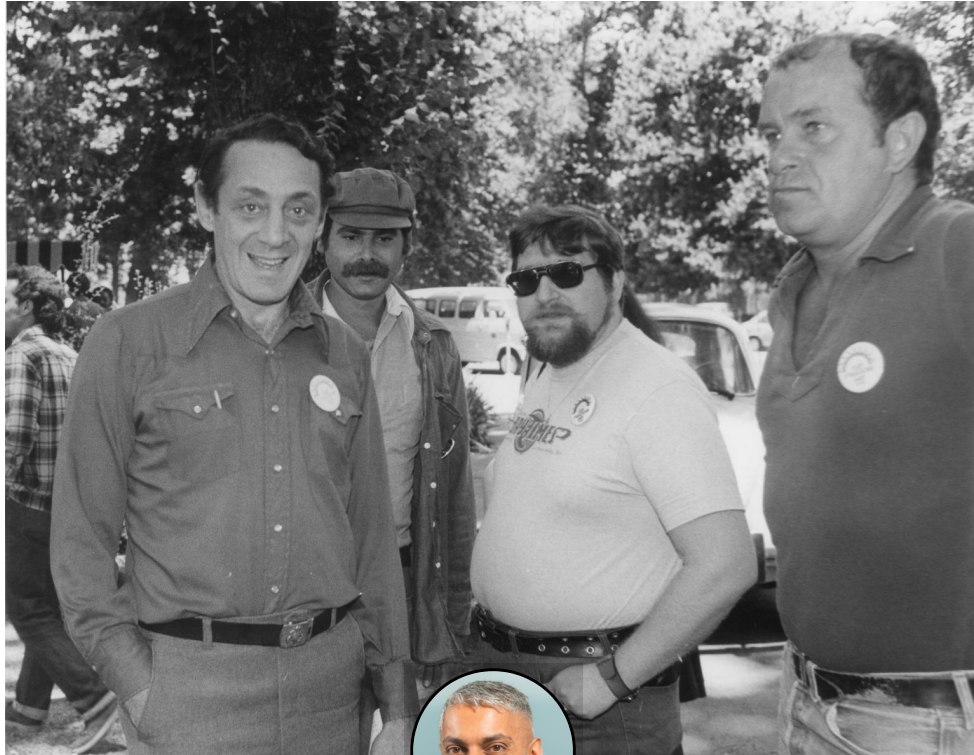


## AMERICA COMES OUT

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POLITICS SEX SOCIOLOGY



BY AMIN GHAZIANI

**O**n June 25, 1978, Harvey Milk delivered a speech at the [San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade](#), where he pleaded with the crowd:

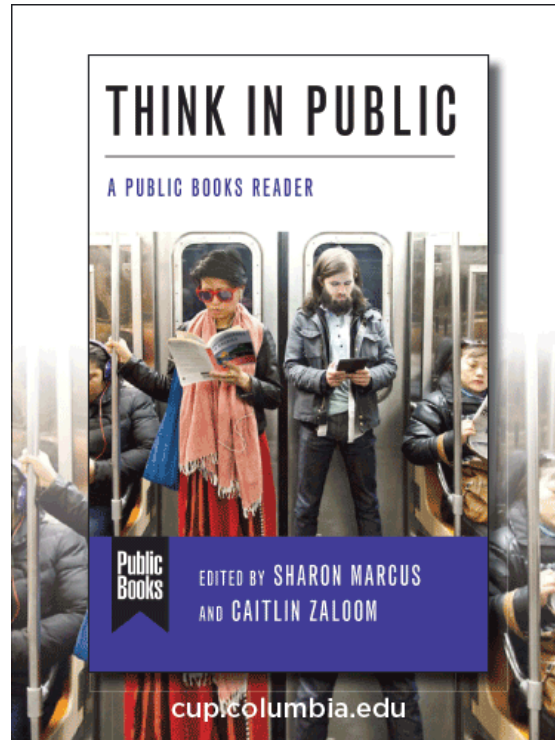
We will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets. ... I'm tired of the conspiracy of silence. ... Gay brothers and sisters, ... you must come out. Come out to your parents. ... Come out to your relatives. ... Come out to your friends, if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors, 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.

Milk was the first openly gay elected official to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors. He believed that the most important thing a person could do was to become more visible, each day and every day. The power of coming out lay precisely in its quotidian character.

Not five decades later, coming out wasn't even the most important part of Pete Buttigieg's presidential campaign. He ascended from relative indistinction to the top echelon of Democratic candidates as a result of his fundraising prowess: Buttigieg claims to have

secured more than \$24 million in three months, more than any other candidate. But what about coming out? What had become of this rhetorical strategy over the years?

Buttigieg made history in 2019 as the first openly gay major candidate for president of the United States, but what made his campaign remarkable was that his sexual orientation *wasn't*. Although the *New York Times* asked, “Is the country really ready to send a gay man to the White House?” Buttigieg refused the terms. “I’m not running to be the gay president of the United States,” he rebutted, in a *CNN town hall* in Charleston, South Carolina. “I’m out here to serve everybody.”



From Milk to Buttigieg, “coming out”—a concept that captures cultural themes of visibility, stigma, and authenticity—has evolved in dramatic ways. And thus, the question of how and why we “come out” as certain kinds of people is the focus of sociologist Abigail C. Saguy’s book *Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are*. In answering that query, the book explores the protean and surprisingly portable quality of metaphors like “coming out” and “the closet,” as well as the relationship between disclosure and social change.

Saguy reveals that coming out has expanded well beyond its origins in gay social worlds. In fact, today people come out as, among other identities, undocumented immigrants and sex-abuse survivors. Many groups have embraced the language of coming out to refute stigma, and to reclaim that stigma as a source of pride and protest.

What do individuals accomplish when they use the terms of “coming out”? While some people, like Buttigieg, may have moved beyond the closet, is it possible that the closet has moved beyond sexual orientation? Whether they proclaim that they are proud of their queerness or of another quality, activists are affirming their collective identities, highlighting the injustices they face, mobilizing mass movements for social change, and inspiring others to refuse—just like Milk once said—to stay quietly in their closets.

Prior to the Stonewall riots, as Saguy writes (with Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer), coming *out* meant coming *into*: gay people revealed their sexual orientation to other gay people, not to heterosexuals. Disclosure, which a person would communicate in mixed company using coded language like “family” or a “friend of Dorothy’s,” felt like joining a secret society. With a nod to the tradition of young women being introduced into elite society—and to eligible bachelors—at grand debutante balls during the turn of the century, gay men would speak about being formally presented to the gay world at drag balls.

But coming out in this fashion was more effective in crafting communities than it was in building a mass movement. How do you build a base from a concealed group?

Enter the civil rights movement. Black activists inspired gay activists to use not just a social framework for sexual identity, but also an ethnic model. Thus, from “Black Is Beautiful” sprang “Gay Is Good.” After that point, gay men and women reframed coming out as a political act, one that could help them shed their self-hatred, establish an identifiable group, and build a social movement.

This well-rehearsed history is where Saguy begins, but only as a point of departure. Thereafter, the book draws on more than one hundred interviews and observations of events, as well as scores of emails, social-media posts, news reports, websites, and blogs to describe how four groups have borrowed the logic of coming out for their own purposes: fat-rights activists, undocumented immigrant youth, Mormon fundamentalist polygamists, and survivors of sexual harassment and assault.

These cases couldn’t be more dissimilar—which is exactly why Saguy’s story stands out in a crowded field. And yet, in each instance, the book shows how “coming out” is at once a cultural concept, a way to resist stigma while reaffirming an authentic self; and a political tactic, a master frame for worldmaking.

Some groups, like fat activists, rework the role of visibility.

Saguy shares a skit from comedian Wanda Sykes, who riffs with her audience about the absurdity of coming out as Black. “I didn’t have to come out Black. I didn’t have to sit my parents down and tell them about my Blackness. I didn’t have to sit them down: ‘Mom, Dad, I gotta tell ya’ll somethin’. I hope you still love me. I’m just gonna say it. Mom, Dad, I’m Black.’” Sykes then parodies her mother’s response: “‘Oh, not Black, Lord! Anything but Black, Jesus!’” The audience is in hysterics—but the humor requires us to assume that coming out applies only to invisible traits.

But, body size can be *hypervisible*. Why, then, do activists still talk about coming out as fat?

One of Saguy’s interviewees, Michelle, explains how fat-rights activists innovated the meaning of coming out by moving away from the notion of revealing a hidden identity to proudly accepting that identity, even or especially if it’s already visible: “I was absolutely unashamed to be called fat. ... If someone else can’t make me feel bad about myself for being fat, then they can’t control me with that.”

Disclosure works differently for Michelle than it did for Harvey Milk. She is coming out of a “glass closet,” to borrow a term from the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick. People in her life will not suddenly discover that their friend or family member is fat. But they will realize, maybe for the first time, that they know someone who is *unashamed* about their body.

From interviews with these activists, Saguy explodes the meaning of coming out. It has “never been *only* about revealing a hidden identity,” she cautions. “It is about *proudly* reclaiming this identity.”

**FROM HARVEY MILK TO PETE BUTTIGIEG, “COMING OUT” —A CONCEPT THAT CAPTURES CULTURAL THEMES OF VISIBILITY, STIGMA, AND AUTHENTICITY—HAS EVOLVED IN DRAMATIC WAYS.**



Turn the page, and you’ll find that Saguy (with Laura E. Enriquez) shifts from cultivating pride to overcoming fear. While fat activists come out to conquer visible stigma, immigrant youth contend with a risk of deportation that would arise from their visibility.

Their goal has been to champion the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. First introduced in 2001, as Saguy and Enriquez note, the federal legislation would create a pathway to legalization for young people who came to the United

States as children and have lived in the country for at least five years, received a high school diploma or a GED, and spent at least two years in college or in the military.

“DREAMers” and other immigrant youth activists hold nationwide coming-out events, in which they encourage each other to “Come Out of the Shadows,” to “Shout It Out,” to declare that they are “Undocumented and Unafraid” or “Undocumented, Unafraid, and Unapologetic.” Their brand of activism shows that coming out resonates even more when activists pair it with other cultural images. “Living in the shadows,” for example, is a phrase that media outlets have used since the 1980s to capture a communal sense of fear among undocumented immigrants.

The result of their coming-out actions? Gallup polls “show increasing support for key points of the DREAM Act,” Saguy and Enriquez note, from 54 percent in 2010 to 65 percent in 2015 and 84 percent in 2016.

The crescendo arrived this year, when the Supreme Court blocked the Trump administration’s attempt to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The Obama-era program protects 800,000 young immigrants from the threat of deportation, while also allowing them to legally work in the country. (Unlike the DREAM Act, DACA does not provide a pathway to citizenship.) [Joe Biden celebrated](#) the decision: “The Supreme Court’s ruling today is a victory made possible by the courage and resilience of hundreds of thousands of DACA recipients who bravely stood up and refused to be ignored.” As they gathered outside the Supreme Court, activists held signs that declared, “We See You, We Hear You, We Love You”; “They Tried To Bury Us. They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds”; and “Home Is Here.”

Perhaps the diffusion of coming-out rhetoric makes sense; after all, fat and undocumented youth activists each have network ties with LGBTQ people. “Just as fat queer women helped diffuse coming out politics from gay rights to fat rights,” explains Saguy, “so undocumented queer people—who have taken up the moniker ‘undocuqueer’—sparked talk of coming out as undocumented.”

But the effectiveness of coming out isn’t restricted to just those in the know. Mormon fundamentalist polygamists, for example, show us that being connected with LGBTQ activists is not always necessary to using coming-out politics.

One activist didn’t mince words: “I don’t like the idea of gays, but they have really helped our movement.” Another offered a more measured view: “It’s funny because we don’t like to compare ourselves to gay people a lot because they do that out of personal sexual preference and we do it for a religious purpose, but our fight is similar because we are all fighting for what the definition of a family or a marriage is. And we as polygamists or gays would like it to be whatever you choose as long as it’s consenting adults.”

So, Mormon “plural-marriage family activists” (as they call themselves) condemn what they call the “gay lifestyle.” Even as they do so, they still liken polygamy to same-sex marriage as a way to maintain that the government should stay out of people’s bedrooms.

Mormons also “embrace the language of choice,” Saguy finds (with Nicole Iturriaga). “They talk about choosing polygamy of their ‘own free will,’ loving it, and having ‘to fight for it.’” Their emphasis on choice suggests that coming out does not always imply coming to terms with a trait that’s largely innate. Nor is it reactive, as with undocumented youth, whose parents brought them from another country. Coming out is manifold, with many meanings.

**MANY GROUPS BEYOND THE L.G.B.T.Q.  
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PROTEST.**



Through the examples above, visibility emerges as a dominant theme for how disparate groups think about coming out. But beyond visibility lie other ideas associated with coming

out, like being heard, speaking up, and having a voice.

These are the frameworks that motivate movements of individuals who have come out as survivors of sexual harassment, assault, or rape, like #MeToo, Take Back the Night, and SlutWalks. This doesn't mean that visibility is irrelevant or uncomplicated. "On one level, all victims of sexual assault and harassment have been invisible," explains Saguy, "due to the shame that leads many to censor themselves and the efforts of abusers ... to silence them. On another level, it is powerful white women—including movie stars like Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Uma Thurman—who initially dominated media coverage of this issue."

Tarana Burke, the activist who founded the #MeToo movement, spoke at the inaugural [Time 100 Summit](#) on October 17, 2019. Burke said that it was time to acknowledge the "untold" stories of other women: "The women of color, trans women, queer people—our stories get pushed aside and our pain is never prioritized. ... We don't talk about indigenous women. ... Their stories go untold." Saguy picked up on this observation as well: "Women of color are especially vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment and experience being objectified in specific ways, even as they are less likely to be believed when they speak out."

The tactic of coming out has acquired momentum for many groups. And with it has come nuance and new questions: Which voices are heard, and which ones are silenced? Who is visible, and who is excluded?

Like all good books, Saguy's *Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are* raises many more questions than it can possibly answer. Coming out was a profoundly transformative tactic for LGBTQ rights, but what does it mean when another group borrows it? Social movements are not hermetically sealed and self-contained, but influence can mutate into appropriation or, worse, perilous disregard.

Consider this: Mary Batchelor, a leader of the plural-marriage family movement, says that she often feels judged for talking about coming out: "There are people that say, well, you're—you're just piggy-backing on [the gay rights movement]. ... Like we're somehow cheating because we're stealing that."


Batchelor's notion of "piggy-backing" brings to mind a heated debate: What happens when "Black Lives Matter"—a discursive frame that defines a generation of anti-racist activism—becomes "[All Lives Matter?](#)" What about "[Black Trans Lives Matter?](#)" To put the point another way: When and which groups can borrow political frameworks? Are some formulations more acceptable, or more objectionable, than others?

In her final pages, Saguy laments that "the left often divides along lines of identity." Is it by accident or design, I wondered, that she devoted each chapter to a single and specific group? Affinities are clear—visibility, stigma, authenticity, networks, and protest are common themes—but coming out as part of a coalition or in an intersectional context is a murkier matter.

Perhaps this is what Saguy means by the "still-unrealized promise" of coming out. Can it unify us *across* our individual differences? I like to imagine that, on those days when Harvey Milk found himself fatigued by the conspiracy of silence, he heard a chorus of voices coming out.

#### **Correction: November 12, 2020**

*An earlier version of this article neglected to acknowledge the coauthors of three chapters in Saguy's book.*

*This article was commissioned by [Michèle Lamont](#).* 

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Featured image: Harvey Milk (at left), Gay Pride San Jose, June 1978. Wikimedia Commons

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