
In the Closet

Steven Seidman

Heterosexual domination may have a long history, but the closet does not.¹ As I use the term, the closet will refer to a life-shaping pattern of homosexual concealment. To be in the closet means that individuals hide their homosexuality in the most important areas of life, with family, friends, and at work. Individuals may marry or avoid certain jobs in order to avoid suspicion and exposure. It is the power of the closet to shape the core of an individual's life that has made homosexuality into a significant personal, social, and political drama in twentieth-century America.

The closet may have existed prior to the 1950s, but it was only in the postwar years that it became a fact of life for many gay people.² At this time, there occurred a heightened level of *deliberateness and aggressiveness* in enforcing heterosexual dominance. A national campaign against homosexuality grew to an almost feverish pitch in the 1950s and 1960s. . . .

The attack on gays accompanied their social visibility. After the war years, many gay individuals moved to cities where they expected to find other people like themselves and at least enough tolerance to put together something like a gay life. My sense is that gay visibility was less the cause than the justification of an anti-gay campaign. A growing public homosexual menace was invoked to fuel an atmosphere of social panic and a hateful politic. But why the panic around homosexuality?

Despite popular images of domestic tranquility on television and in the movies, the 1950s and early 1960s was a period of great anxiety for many Americans.³

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There was a feeling of change in the air that evoked new hopes as well as new dangers. For example, as the war ended America emerged as a true superpower. However, it now faced what many considered to be a growing Soviet threat. Hysteria around the red scare narrowed social tolerance. Dissent and nonconventional lifestyles were associated with political subversion. Communists and homosexuals were sometimes viewed as parallel threats to “the American way of life.” As invisible, corrupting forces seducing youth, spreading perversion and moral laxity, and weakening our national will, communists and homosexuals were to be identified and ruthlessly suppressed. And ruthlessly suppressed they were.⁴

Moreover, though the war was over and America was victorious, this nation was changing in ways that were troubling to many of its citizens. For example, women now had some real choices. Their social independence during the war gave many women a sense of having options; some wanted only to return to being wives and mothers, but others wished to pursue a career or remain single. Set against the happy homemaker on television shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Ozzie and Harriet* was the “new woman” in *Cosmopolitan* or Helen Gurli[e]y Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl*. The Cosmo girl may have been heterosexual, but she was also educated, career-minded, and sexy.

Men were also restless. During the war they had been exposed to different types of people, places, and ideas. While many men wanted little more than a job, wife, and a home, the world they returned to offered them many choices—a bounty of well-paying jobs, free higher education, and “good” women who did not necessarily believe that sex had to lead to marriage. Hugh Hefner’s playboy lifestyle may not have expressed men’s actual lives, but it tapped into a reality and a wish for expanded sexual choice.

It was not just adults who were restless. There was a growing population of young people who were becoming downright unruly. The popularity of rock 'n' roll expressed something of their restless spirit. Many young people wished to fashion lives that expressed their individual desires and wants rather than the social scripts of their parents and society. The panic over "juvenile delinquents" and "loose girls" expressed Americans' fears that the family, church, and neighborhood community had lost control of their youth.

So, while changes in the postwar period created a sense of expanded choice for many Americans, it also stirred up fears of disorder and social breakdown. Many citizens looked to the government and cultural institutions like television and magazines such as *The Reader's Digest* to be reassured about what this nation stood for. On the global front, protecting what came to be thought of as "the American way of life" meant flexing our military muscle to ward off the communist threat. On the domestic front, moral order was thought to require stable families—and such families were to be built on the exclusive foundation of heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, and traditional dichotomous gender roles. In this context, the homosexual stepped forward as a menacing figure, invoked to defend a narrow ideal of respectable heterosexuality. In popular culture and in the psychiatric establishment, the homosexual came to symbolize a threat to marriage, the family, and civilization itself; he or she was imagined as predatory, seductive, corrupting, promiscuous, and a gender deviant. The moral message of this campaign against homosexuality was clear: anyone who challenges dominant sexual and gender norms risks homosexual stigma and social disgrace. The homosexual was not alone in symbolizing social disorder and deviance; there was also the "loose woman," "the delinquent," and "the sex offender." All these menacing figures served to reinforce a narrow norm of the respectable sexual citizen—heterosexual, married, monogamous, gender conventional, and family oriented.

By the end of the 1960s, the idea of a rigid division between the pure heterosexual and the polluted, dangerous homosexual began to take hold in American culture. The state and other institutions were given

the moral charge to protect America from the homosexual menace. Gay men and lesbians were to be excluded from openly participating in respectable society. They were demonized, and any trace of them in public was to be repressed. The world of the closet was created.

The Closet as Social Oppression

... If the concept of the closet is to be sociologically useful, it should not be used casually to cover any and all acts of homosexual concealment. The closet is a historically specific social pattern. This concept makes sense only if there is also the idea of homosexuality as a core identity. Viewed as an identity, homosexuality cannot be isolated and minimized as a discrete feeling or impulse; choosing to organize a public heterosexual life would create a feeling of betraying one's true self. The closet may make a respectable social status possible but at a high price: living a lie. Not surprisingly, the closet is often likened to "a prison," "an apartheid," "a coffin-world," or to "lives led in the shadows."⁵ It is said to emasculate the self by repressing the very passions that give life richness and vitality. . . .

In short, the closet is about social oppression. Among its defining features are the following. First, to be in the closet means that individuals act to conceal who they are from those that matter most in their lives: family, friends, and sometimes spouses and children. Being in the closet will shape the psychological and social core of an individual's life. Second, the closet is about social isolation. Individuals are often isolated from other homosexually oriented individuals and are often emotionally distant from the people they are closest to—kin and friends.⁶ Third, secrecy and isolation are sustained by feelings of shame, guilt, and fear. The closeted individual often internalizes society's hatred of homosexuals; if he or she manages to weaken the grip of shame, the fear of public disgrace and worse enforces secrecy and isolation. Finally, secrecy, isolation, shame, and fear pressure individuals to conduct a life involving much deception and duplicity.⁷ To be in the closet is, then, to suffer systematic harm—to lack basic rights and a spectrum of opportunities and social benefits; to be

denied respect and a feeling of social belonging; and more than likely to forfeit the kinds of intimate companionship and love that make personal happiness possible.

This notion of the closet makes sense only in relation to another concept: *heterosexual domination*.⁸ The closet is a way of adjusting to a society that aggressively enforces heterosexuality as the preferred way of life. In the era of the closet, heterosexual dominance works not only by championing a norm of heterosexuality but also by demonizing homosexuality. The making of a culture of homosexual pollution is basic to the creation of the closet. Enforcing the exclusion of homosexuals from public life also involves aggressive institutional repression. Homosexuals are suppressed by means of laws, policing practices, civic disenfranchisement, and harassment and violence. The state has been a driving force in the making of the closet. To the extent that heterosexual privilege is enforced by keeping homosexuals silent and invisible, we can speak of a condition of heterosexual domination.

The closet does not, however, create passive victims. Too often, critics emphasize only the way the closet victimizes and strips the individual of any sense of integrity and purposefulness. But closeted individuals remain active, deliberate agents. They make decisions about their lives, forge meaningful social ties, and may manage somewhat satisfying work and intimate lives, even if under strained circumstances.

Passing is not a simple, effortless act; it's not just about denial or suppression. The closeted individual closely monitors his or her speech, emotional expression, and behavior in order to avoid unwanted suspicion. The sexual meaning of the things (for example, clothes, furniture) and acts (for example, styles of walking, talking, posture) of daily life must be carefully read in order to skillfully fashion a convincing public heterosexual identity. For closeted individuals, daily life acquires a heightened sense of theatricality or performative deliberateness. The discrete, local practices of "sexual identity management" that is the stuff of the closet reveals something of the workings of heterosexual domination but also of how gays negotiate this social terrain.

Accommodating to the closet is only part of the story. Rebellion is the other. For individuals to rebel against the closet they must be seen as active, thoughtful, and risk-taking agents. Passive victims do not rebel; they surrender to things as they are. To reject the closet, individuals must view the disadvantages and indignities of the closet as illegitimate and changeable. They must have the inner resources and moral conviction to contest heterosexual domination. As sociologists have put it, rebellion is propelled less by utter despair and victimization than by "relative deprivation." Individuals rebel when social disadvantages feel unjust but changeable—which is to say, when they don't feel only like victims.

Finally, it is perhaps more correct to speak of multiple closets. The experience and social pattern of being in the closet vary considerably depending on factors such as age, class, gender, race, ability or disability, region, religion, and nationality. In this [reading] I convey something of the negotiated and varied texture of the closet through a series of case studies. These examples are not intended to capture the full spectrum of closet experiences, but to show something of its oppressive, negotiated, and varied character. . . .

Social Class and the Closet: Bill's Story

Bill (b. 1958) is a baby boomer. . . . He grew up in a small town. Bill recalls feeling sexual desire for boys at an early age. "I probably started thinking about my homosexuality around the time I was ten. I guess it was when other boys were becoming interested in girls and dating and I wasn't. That's when I started to see that I've got to hide who I am and I've got to pretend that I like girls." . . . Bill remembers being exposed to a public culture of homophobia. Family and friends referred to homosexuals in demeaning ways. Bill was very religious and quickly learned from his church minister that "God hates homosexuals." . . . Bill grew up in a culture that not only viewed heterosexuality as an ideal, but also aggressively enforced its compulsory status by defiling the homosexual.

Bill felt overwhelming pressure to be heterosexual. His parents encouraged dating and expected him to marry and have a family. Kin, friends, church, and

the media likewise celebrated an adult life organized around heterosexuality. For virtually all Americans born after 1950, there was a clear, often explicit expectation that adults should marry and raise a family.

Bill didn't want to disappoint those who mattered to him. While being socialized into an ideal of heterosexuality motivated him to adopt a public heterosexual identity, fear drove Bill into the closet. "Fear is the biggest thing. Fear of the people that might find out, fear of what will happen if they did." Fear, for Bill, translated into an anxiety that he would lose his family, livelihood, and the respect of his community.

The closet provided Bill with a strategy to resolve the conflict between social expectations and his homosexuality. He decided to present a consistently heterosexual public identity. This entailed managing his homosexual feelings and negotiating a public identity that avoided suspicion. From the standpoint of being in the closet, Bill experienced social life as filled with risk, a world where others read the sexual meaning of his behavior. To navigate this scary world, Bill had to learn the skills to successfully project a heterosexual identity. . . .

From childhood to his coming out in his mid-thirties, Bill relied on several strategies to sustain the closet. At the heart of the closet was self-control. At times, this meant that Bill simply had to suppress any homosexual feeling. "I didn't act on it at all for many years." At other times, Bill threw himself into work and his marriage to control his homosexuality. "I channeled my energies into work and our marriage. I wanted a family, a house. I just worked and worked. I was so closeted." Even after he was married, Bill describes a life of intense self-control to a point of self-estrangement. "I've always been aware of what I say and how I act, how I hold my cigarette, how I laugh, I mean anything. When I was living in the closet, I had a mask that I presented to anybody. It was tailored to the person or people that I was around. I didn't know who I was really." Self-control meant carefully regulating his behavior. Bill dressed to avoid homosexual suspicion. "I didn't wear anything that looked like it could be gay." Finally, self-control involved social distance. Bill had few friends after high school, and they were kept at arm's length to avoid possible exposure. Although his family was

close, Bill kept aloof from his parents. "I couldn't be as open to them as I wanted to be."

In Bill's closet world, everyone potentially suspected. Despite his considerable efforts to avoid suspicion, including marriage, enlisting in the marines, and a seamless masculine self-presentation, Bill believed that his wife suspected. Perhaps, he thinks, she interpreted his lack of sexual passion symptomatically. Bill believes that his parents suspected as well. Asked why, Bill referred to a cluster of behaviors that might signal homosexuality. "The people I hung around with, the way I dressed, and [after marriage] the absence of a girl in my life." Bill thought that his mother suspected because he didn't date after his divorce. Bill threw himself into work and parenting in part to avoid suspicion. "I was hoping that my mother would figure that I didn't have time for a relationship, but I think that's when she started to question [my sexual identity]." In this world of pervasive suspicion, Bill began to suspect others. For example, he wondered about his father. "I always had an idea that he might be gay. He was very gentle. He tried real hard to get everybody to like him, and everybody did."

Bill described his closet world in theatrical terms. "My whole life until recently has been being the actor, pretending I'm somebody I'm not." Invoking the image of the actor to describe his life tellingly acknowledges that Bill had in fact acquired considerable social skill in order to succeed at passing. Of course, this heterosexual identity performance meant, as he says, living an inauthentic life. Bill passed successfully, but to do so he married, had children, joined the marines, became dependent on alcohol, and distanced himself from his own inner life as well as from family and friends. In short, the closet was a way to accommodate being the bearer of a polluted identity but at a considerable psychic and social cost. . . .

Homosexuality presented a real symbolic and economic threat. . . . In . . . working-class culture, family was the corner-stone of life. Getting married and having a family was expected and celebrated. Men were expected to present a more or less seamless masculine self. Homosexuality threatened humiliation—for themselves and their families. Exposure risked

isolation from their kin and their blue-collar community of kin, peers, and neighbors. . . .

[His] fear of exposure was also economically based. The financial interdependence between the individual and family is central to working-class life. For example, as a wage earner Bill was economically independent. Yet he was aware that his material well-being was never secure. Growing up, he had seen adults lose jobs as industry migrated from his hometown. He saw kin sustaining their own when brothers, cousins, aunts, and uncles were out of work for long periods of time. Bill considered his family a potential source of material support; he also expected that at some point his family would ask for his financial help.

Class shapes closet patterns.⁹ The extent of economic interdependence between the individual and his or her family varies between blue- and white-collar workers. This class difference shapes how individuals manage their homosexuality.

For the middle class, economic independence is valued and expected. This provides a material base for coming out and organizing a public gay life. At a minimum, middle-class individuals have options. They can move to avoid exposure; they can afford to establish a workable double life; and they can sustain themselves if estranged from their families. Moreover, because of the high value placed on individualism, middle-class individuals anticipate a considerable disengagement from their family and the community they were brought up in. They can also expect a relatively smooth integration into a middle-class gay life as compensation for any estrangement from family and friends resulting from coming out.

For working-class individuals, economic interdependence with kin is a lifelong expectation. Exiting the closet as a working-class lesbian or gay man carries serious economic risks—for themselves and their kin. Blue-collar workers expect that at some point they will either turn to kin for economic help or their family will turn to them. Additionally, estrangement from kin carries the threat of losing a primary source of community. There is no anticipation of an immediate compensation for lost community because of the middle-class character of the gay institutionalized world.

The closet is not, then, the same experience for all individuals. To understand its workings, we have to pay close attention to . . . social class.

Race and the Closet: Robert's Story

Bill's . . . strong economic ties to [his family] made exiting the closet difficult and potentially more risky than for the economically independent middle class. But [his] white racial status made it relatively easy for [him] to identify as gay. The gay world—at least the institutionalized world of bars, social and political organizations, and cultural institutions (newspapers, magazines, publishers, theater groups)—was and still is overwhelmingly white. Moreover, American public cultures, both white and nonwhite, associate being gay with being white. Accordingly, race is a key factor shaping the dynamics of homosexuality, including the closet. . . .

To illustrate, consider the implications for blacks of an overwhelmingly white gay community. No matter how accepting some individuals may be, blacks often feel like outsiders in the gay community. The culture, the leadership, the organizations, and the political agenda of the institutionalized gay world have been and remain dominated by whites. Blacks often report encountering an inhospitable gay world, one that until recently participated in the racism of straight America. For example, through the early 1990s, black men tell of being carded at gay bars or objectified as exotic sexual selves; black women describe being silenced or ignored in decisions about social events and politics. Despite a deliberate commitment to a multicultural gay community, blacks continue to feel that they have to negotiate a somewhat foreign social terrain.

White privilege in the gay world means that blacks manage their homosexuality somewhat differently than whites. Whites may come out to an unfriendly world of kin and friends, but they anticipate an easy integration into a gay world that will affirm their sense of self and offer an alternative type of community. By contrast, if blacks exit from the closet they expect a struggle for acceptance not only in the straight but also in the gay world. To state the contrast sharply, whites expect a trade-off when they

come out: estrangement from the straight world in exchange for social integration and acceptance in the gay community. Blacks do not expect such compensation for their anticipated disapproval and diminished status in the straight world. Given their more ambivalent relationship to the gay community, blacks may be more likely than their white counterparts to manage their homosexuality within the framework of the closet.

If an inhospitable or at least uncertain reception in the gay world gives pause to blacks as they consider coming out, so too does the central role that a race-based community plays in their lives. Many blacks have a fundamental personal and social investment in maintaining integration into a race-based community. This community offers protection and material sustenance in the face of the bodily and economic threats of racism; it provides a positive culture of racial pride and solidarity. Maintaining strong ties with kin and a race-based community is a cornerstone of black identity in a way that is obviously not true for whites. If whites grow up with a sense of racial entitlement and a feeling that it is their America, many blacks experience and expect an inhospitable reception in the larger society. Experience and kin have taught them that their personal and social well-being depends on maintaining solidarity with a black community. For many blacks, America is two nations, and it's only in the black world that they feel a sense of integrity and social belonging.

In short, blacks—straight or gay—are heavily invested in their racial identity and in their membership in the black community in a way that is generally not true of whites. Coming out, then, risks not merely estrangement from kin and community but potentially the loss of a secure sense of identity and social belonging. In other words, leaving the closet threatens social isolation from both the straight and gay worlds. It risks being cast adrift in a society that does not recognize or value being black and gay; it jeopardizes a secure sense of belonging and protection (physical and economic) in exchange for an outsider status. . . .

The absence, at least until recently, of a politically assertive public gay and straight culture supporting black gay men and women has made the wager of coming out risky and potentially too costly for many

individuals. Moreover, as black communities have continued to struggle with a sense of being under assault by racism, poverty, and family instability, tolerance for a public gay life is shaky. The closet presents a credible option, especially if, as some evidence suggests, a more relaxed or flexible closet pattern than that experienced by . . . Bill is possible in many black communities. Moreover, as black gay networks developed in the 1980s and 1990s, some blacks now have an alternative to the closet. However, to the extent that these networks remain small and institutionally insecure, establishing an independent gay life remains much more difficult for many blacks than for whites.

Some of these dynamics and dilemmas of being black and gay in America surface in Robert's story. His is a story of a black gay man trying to navigate between a black world that is not seen as particularly hostile nor especially friendly and a somewhat welcoming white-dominated gay world but one that doesn't feel quite like home. In the end, Robert tries to forge a satisfying life by becoming part of a small, fragile black gay world that is not solidly part of a gay or a black community. . . .

Anticipation of disapproval and rejection underpins Robert's emotional and social distancing from the straight world. Fear prevented Robert from disclosing to his family as a young person. Fear also shaped his public school experience. Although he grew up in a predominantly black community in Brooklyn, Robert went to high school in what he described as a small all-white town in upstate New York. He lived in an almost constant state of fear during these years. Negotiating his racial difference was hard enough. The prospect of being viewed as sexually deviant terrified him. Robert managed by maintaining social distance. He avoided any contact with classmates that might be suspected of being gay. He remained silent in the face of an openly homophobic school culture. Robert tried to fit in by lying about having a girlfriend back home. Despite excelling in sports and enjoying athletics, Robert refused to participate in any school team sports. He was afraid that he'd "get a hard-on in the shower." . . .

After high school, Robert joined the navy, where exposure would have meant a discharge as well as

social disgrace. He managed to pass by being a loner and by excessive drinking during his years in the service.

After leaving the navy, Robert worked as an electrician in Los Angeles. Away from home, economically independent, and in a liberal social environment, Robert began to participate in gay life. He dated and soon had a boyfriend.

Robert did not, however, disclose his sexual identity to any of his coworkers. He preferred to keep personal matters out of his work life. Although his coworkers often talked about their boyfriends, girlfriends, marriages, and children, Robert never shared any of his personal life. Robert remained aloof. Although he worked at this job for six years, he did not become friends with any of his coworkers. In order to sustain social distance, Robert avoided any meaningful social ties with his coworkers. As a result of being closeted, Robert's workplace experience resembled the impersonal, dehumanizing world that Karl Marx and Max Weber described in their chilling portraits of modern industrial life.

At the age of twenty-three, Robert came out to his mother, who told his father and his siblings. Robert has never discussed specific aspects of his gay life with any family member. They all know, but it's not talked about. Robert interprets the absence of hostile behavior and rejection on the part of his family as indicating acceptance. Asked why he keeps his gay life separate from his family, Robert says that his homosexuality is personal and doesn't need to be shared. Accordingly, his family knew nothing of his boyfriend or any other aspect of his personal life. Much to his regret, but hardly surprising, Robert speaks of a weakening of his family bond. Today, he's not close to his mother or anyone in his family. His visits with his family are infrequent and lack the emotional spontaneity and richness of past family interactions. For these reasons, Robert has not told his family that he is HIV positive. . . .

Cheap housing led Robert to live in a predominantly black neighborhood. His contacts with his neighbors are formal and lack emotional depth. In fact, he has never come out to any straight black person, aside from his mother. Robert says matter-of-factly that no black person ever asked him if he

was gay. He admits, though, that many blacks disparage being gay. "Many blacks think . . . it's already dangerous out there for a black man, why would you want to add another danger to your life? Besides, being gay was viewed for a long time as equivalent to having AIDS. So, most of the conversations [among blacks] about being gay . . . is about having sex and death. Because they perceive the lifestyle as being very painful . . . not many people are going to be accepting of the lifestyle." . . .

Today, Robert's life is divided between a gay and a straight world. The former provides emotional and social sustenance; the latter is a somewhat risky terrain he navigates to do what he has to do. He speaks, as is typical of those speaking from a closeted standpoint, of a heterosexual dictatorship. Robert's closetedness entails such a narrowing of his world that intimate expression and bonding are possible only within a very small social circle. His closet world is not built on pretense (as was true of Bill), but a fear and distrust so deeply felt that his social distancing has cost him his family, meaningful ties to a black community, a satisfying work life, and has resulted in a pervasive loneliness. . . .

Gender and the Closet: Renee's Story

Despite their . . . differences, . . . Bill and Robert relied heavily on being more or less conventionally masculine men to avoid suspicion. Fortunately, a masculine self-presentation and social roles expressed their spontaneous sense of themselves. However, not all lesbians and gay men can manage a conventional gender presentation so effortlessly. For some individuals, their sense of self can be poignantly at odds with gender norms. If these individuals are to avoid coming out, they must find ways to be gender nonconventional without eliciting suspicion.

These remarks highlight an obvious point: managing gender has been and still is at the heart of managing sexual identity. This is true for men and women. To the extent that men and masculinity are socially privileged, however, the dynamics of managing gender and sexual identity are somewhat different for men and women.¹⁰

For men, exhibiting the conventional signs of masculinity confers social authority and privilege. Although factors such as class, ethnicity, or ableness create inequalities among men, their masculinity establishes them as a privileged group in relation to women. Masculine men are also presumed to be heterosexual. Of course, if men fail to exhibit those behaviors that serve as conventional markers of masculinity, their dominant status is threatened. And if men depart considerably from masculine norms, they risk losing the privileges associated with being a man and being heterosexual. For men whose inner sense of self is emphatically feminine, passing presents a huge challenge because of the scarcity of acceptable social identities and roles for feminine men. Accordingly, gay men who wish to successfully pass must effectively manage a routine performance of masculinity. But—and here's the key point—when gay men pass by means of exhibiting a conventional masculine persona they share fully in men's gender privilege. Closeted gay men are given the same support straight men receive to conform to masculine gender roles and can claim its considerable social benefits.

For women, the gender managing of sexual identity is somewhat different. Although a conventional feminine self-presentation confers a status as normal and straight, it also positions women as subordinate to men. Respectable women are expected to take up social identities and roles that are consistent with feminine gender expectations. In contemporary America, these roles do not carry the authority, status, and material advantage of masculine roles. Women who wish to assume the social roles and claim the privileges associated with masculine men risk disapproval and may forfeit the benefits of being a normal woman. Lesbians who wish to pass but also to appropriate masculine roles that confer authority and material advantage risk exposure. This is a dilemma that men don't experience. Men who claim masculine power are rewarded as men, and as presumptively straight; women who claim the same privileges associated with masculinity are gender rebels and risk stigma and social harm.

One way that lesbians manage this dilemma is to take on social roles that may be considered mascu-

line (for example, as an athlete, a member of the military service, an office manager) but are viewed as marginally legitimate for straight women. Although there are such roles, they are few and are not free of risk. The story of Renee illustrates this particular closet strategy.

Renee describes herself as a masculine woman. She was born in 1970 and grew up in a small southern town. Her Baptist family and community did not accept homosexuality. Growing up, she became aware of her strong feelings for women while learning that others considered homosexuality to be immoral. She was confused about what these feelings meant for her sense of self. She decided to keep them secret. "I was brought up hearing the statement that you can grow up to be anything you want except a faggot. And it was engrained in me that this was not an accepted lifestyle. It was sinful and it was a way that God was telling you that your life is not good." Renee "feared rejection. I mean, nobody wants to be rejected." Exposure would put her at risk of losing her family "emotionally and financially. . . . The biggest thing that I feared was they wouldn't love me anymore because it was so engrained that this [homosexuality] was not an acceptable lifestyle."

It was not only the homophobia of her family and community that worried Renee. The world of her kin, neighbors, and church was heterosexual—it was both the reality and the unquestioned ideal. Renee was expected to marry and have a family. "My father talked all the time about how much he was looking forward to walking me down the aisle and that I should have lots of children so that they could have lots of grandchildren." Renee retreated into the closet to avoid social rejection and to manage the conflict between what was expected of her and her desires.

Because Renee is not a feminine woman, the closet has been a difficult adjustment. As long as she can remember, Renee felt more comfortable as part of a masculine male culture. As a young person, she was thought of as a tomboy. She says that in the town where she grew up in the 1970s and early 1980s, the tomboy did not evoke homosexual suspicion. Girls could be tomboys but only, as she came to learn, as a young person. The same masculine self-presentation in an adult would evoke suspicion. . . .

Renee felt that a masculine-gendered self was basic to who she was. It could not be denied or changed, but perhaps its social meaning could be managed. As the tomboy identification lost credibility in high school, she tried to fashion a public identity as an athlete. Renee thought that participating in school sports might minimize suspicion or at least create ambiguity around the sexual meaning of her masculine presentation. It was as if being identified as a female athlete, like her earlier identity as a tomboy, would allow Renee to safely express her masculinity. In short, as Renee moved closer to an adult world, it was harder to control the social meaning of her masculine self-presentation; it became difficult to avoid being read, by herself and others, as a lesbian.

In a last-ditch effort to find a legitimate social role for her masculinity Renee joined the military. She encountered a fairly open network of lesbians. She came to accept herself as a lesbian in the course of her military duty.

She believes that today people look at her and see a lesbian. "There's no doubt in my mind that because of my masculine way of dress and look that this signals to people that I am a lesbian. . . . The way I walk, dress, wear my hair. . . . I look like a dyke." Renee feels the weight of a society that collapses gender and sexual nonconformity. Indeed, since Renee believes that her masculinity expresses something basic to who she is, the choice she confronted was stark: to be spontaneous and honest, and therefore to be read as a lesbian; or to pass, which would require a considerable effort at refashioning her public persona. Because gender nonconventionality was at the core of her sense of self, the closet proved a tough accommodation. For a time, the availability of social roles for masculine but presumed straight women (tomboy, athlete, soldier) allowed Renee to avoid exposure. However, as she became an adult civilian, the lack of such roles put pressure on her to either escalate gender management in order to pass or come out. Renee eventually came out.

While there are no unambiguous markers of sexual identity in contemporary America, gender has served as perhaps the chief sign. Masculine men and feminine women are typically assumed to be heterosexual. Emphatically feminine men and masculine

women would likely surrender this presumption. As one twenty-four-year-old gay man told me, "You assume straight men are more masculine, a little rough looking, hair's not perfect. So when you see a guy whose dress is perfect, the hair's perfect, everything is, you know, picture perfect, that's gay." Managing gender presentation has then been at the heart of managing sexual identity. To the extent, moreover, that gender is thickly coded, passing may entail considerable effort. Describing herself as having a forceful, take-charge personality as well as preferring a no-makeup, jeans-and-sweatshirt look, Rachel, a forty-three-year-old lesbian, says that passing required a virtual makeover of her public self. She groomed and dressed in a self-consciously feminine style and crafted a public persona that deemphasized her masculine personality. "I try to look and act very feminine so people won't look at me or take notice."

Gender is not, however, an unambiguous sign of sexual identity. Albert is a twenty-six-year-old gay black man. His soft and high-pitched voice and the meticulous attention he pays to grooming and dress could have marked him as gay during high school. However, Albert thinks that his high profile as an athlete and the absence of explicit homosexual disclosure created ambiguity around his sexual identity. Being black reinforced uncertainty about the sexual meaning of his gender nonconformity. "A lot of people see being gay as a white issue."

The indeterminate character of a homosexual sign system is in sharp contrast to the way racial and gender identities are socially coded. In the United States, race is in most instances unambiguously conveyed by skin color. And gender is so thickly coded by the sexed body and by our behaviors that it's almost impossible to avoid publicly flagging a clear gender identity.¹¹ Sexual identity, however, is thinly and ambiguously coded. In the age of the closet, there were efforts to thicken the code by identifying specific behaviors as marking heterosexual and homosexual identities. In particular, gender served as a master code of sexual identity, but it remained somewhat ambiguous as a sexual signifier. A prolonged single status, a lack of interest in the opposite sex, a steady gaze at a person of the same sex, or a fastidiousness about grooming (men) or the lack thereof (women)

have also functioned as part of a historically specific grammar of sexual identity.

Neither Victims nor Heroes

The closet is a condition of social oppression. To be in the closet is to live with shame, guilt, and fear. Individuals carefully manage daily life in order to avoid suspicion. Some individuals may make life-shaping decisions about love and intimacy, or work and friends, that are motivated by the wish to avoid detection. The closet makes integration possible but at a considerable personal cost: passionless marriages, loveless lives, estrangement from family and peers, and, sometimes, a paralyzing isolation that leaves individuals depressed and suicidal.

The closet didn't just happen. The aggressive enforcement of heterosexuality as an identity and way of life produced it. Specifically, the closet took shape in response to a culture that polluted homosexuality and policed behavior by stigmatizing gender nonconformity as a sign of homosexuality. And, through the repressive (censoring, criminalizing, and disenfranchising) practices of the state, the homosexual was driven from public life. By the 1950s the closet had become the defining reality for many gay Americans.

The closet is a strategy of accommodating to heterosexual domination. Individuals choose the closet to manage what is considered a deviant identity; it makes possible social respect and integration, even if it may cost the individual his or her sense of personal integrity and well-being. There is enormous variation in closet patterns. . . .

[The] shift in the emotional, moral, and social texture of the closet after Stonewall is evident in the stories of Bill, Robert, and Renee. . . . They each grew up in a world organized around heterosexuality. But there was a well-organized visible movement and gay subcultures in many cities that celebrated being gay as good. Despite the weight of society pressuring them to live heterosexually, the decision to live as a "heterosexual" wasn't a foregone conclusion. Individuals coming of age after the 1970s had a sense of choice that was for all practical purposes absent [before]. But the flip side was that choosing to be closeted was likely much more anguished and difficult

for these later generations. . . . Being in the closet was now associated with living a false, inauthentic life. . . .

Stonewall likely had the effect of driving many individuals deeply into the closet. Indeed, many homosexuals who came of age in the 1950s and early 1960s thought that this new social assertiveness and visibility would bring about greater social repression; it would also create considerable turmoil for many homosexuals who had managed a more or less comfortable social adjustment in the closet. They were in some ways right. While the closet doors may have tightened for some, they were loosened, even unhinged, for many others. "Out of the closet" became the slogan of the new gay liberationist movement.

The closet is an unstable social condition. While its purpose is to keep homosexuals silent and invisible, its very creation causes a heightened public awareness of homosexuality. Laws criminalizing homosexuality, police harassing and arresting homosexuals, and newspapers publishing their names in order to shame them have the effect of both enforcing heterosexual domination and heightening public awareness of the pervasive presence of homosexuals. The closet may expel real, living homosexuals from visible public life, but it makes this sexual personage into a haunting symbolic presence.¹² The status of the closeted homosexual as both omnipresent but unseen shapes a culture of homosexual suspicion. In principle, no one is to be spared. No matter how impeccable an individual's heterosexual credentials, he or she is not entirely free of suspicion. A flawless heterosexual presentation may, after all, be taken as masking a latent homosexual self.

The closet has another ironic effect. It creates a heightened self-awareness on the part of homosexually oriented individuals. The social pressure to methodically conceal rivets attention precisely on that which is proscribed: homosexuality. For some closeted individuals, homosexuality becomes a core self-identity as daily life centers on either avoiding suspicion of homosexuality or coming out. And the fashioning of homosexuality into a core social identity makes rebellion against the closet possible—and likely. At an individual level, rebellion often meant coming out, affirming a gay self, and becoming part

of a gay community. At a political level, a movement took shape—gay liberationism and lesbian feminism—that challenged the institutional and cultural supports of the closet; that is, the culture of pollution and the state-backed policy of repression. This movement has, by all accounts, been enormously successful even if so many battles have been lost and so many remain to be waged.

The era of the closet is hardly over. Yet the present is a world apart from that of just one or two decades ago. The universe of the butch, the queen, the normal straight, the culture of camp, the seamless and open homophobic culture, and uniform state and institutional repression are taking on the character of a historical era. The closet has not disappeared, but there are today more people choosing to live beyond the closet.

NOTES

1. Consider this description of the world of a middle-class lesbian living in the late 1920s and 1930s: "During the 1920s and 1930s Boyer Reinstein was an active lesbian within a community of lesbian friends. She had few, if any, negative feelings about being a lesbian, and she was 'out' to her immediate family. . . . Yet, she did not publicly disclose being gay. She was always discreet." The author, Elizabeth Kennedy, cautions against using the concept of the closet to depict Reinstein's social world. "I am afraid using the term 'closet' to refer to the culture of the 1920s and 1930s might be anachronistic." Elizabeth Kennedy, "'But We Would Never Talk about It': The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South Dakota, 1928–1933," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). Similarly, George Chauncey describes a working-class gay culture in which gays and straights openly mingle in saloons, cafeterias, rent parties, and speakeasies. The gay world before World War I is said to be very different from the era inaugurated by the Stonewall rebellions. For example, the language and concept of "coming out of the closet" was foreign to this gay world. "Gay people in the prewar years . . . did not speak of coming out of what we call the gay closet but rather of coming out into what they called homosexual society or the gay world, a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor . . . so hidden as closet implies." George Chauncey, *Gay New York Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

2. For descriptions of homosexual life in the 1950s and 1960s, *The Mattachine Review* and *The Ladder*, respectively published by the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, are superb sources. For examples of personal testimony, see Peter Nardi, David Sanders, and Judd Marmor, eds., *Growing up before Stonewall: Life Stories of Some Gay Men* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Donald Vining, *A Gay Diary*, 5 vols. (New York: Pepys Press, 1979–93); Martin Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey* (New York: Dutton, 1991); Robert Reinhart, *A History of Shadows: A Novel* (Boston: Alyson, 1986); Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (New York: Crossing Press, 1982); Andrea Weiss and Greta Schiller, *Before Stonewall; The Making of the Gay and Lesbian Community* (New York: Naiad Press, 1988); Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Meridian, 1976) and *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983); and Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights: An Oral History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). For informative popular and academic work of the time, see Daniel Webster Cory [pseudonym Edward Sagarin], *The Homosexual in America* (New York: Peter Nevill, 1951); Evelyn Hooker, "Male Homosexuals and Their Worlds," in *Sexual Inversion*, ed. J. Marmor (New York: Basic Books, 1965); Martin Hoffman, *The Gay World* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (San Francisco: Bantam, 1972); Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972); John Gagnon and William Simon, "The Lesbians: A Preliminary Overview," in *Sexual Deviance*, ed. William Simon and John Gagnon (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). For some current scholarly perspectives on gay life in the immediate postwar years, see John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Leila J. Rupp, "'Imagine My Surprise': Women's Relationships in Mid-Twentieth-Century America," in *Hidden from History*, ed. M. Duberman, M. Vicinus and G. Chauncey Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990); Rochella Thorpe, "'A House where Queers Go': African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940–1975," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); and Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly*

and *Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-72* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

3. To understand the social context of the 1950s as a time of both change and anxiety, especially regarding gender and intimate life, I have drawn on the following: Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Barbara Ehrenreich, *Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1983); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning after: Sexual Politics and the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Robert Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

4. On the making of the closet in the 1950s, see John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; Allan Berube and John D'Emilio, "The Military and Lesbians during the McCarthy Years," *Signs* 9 (Summer 1984): 759-75; Barbara Epstein, "Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S." *Critical Sociology* 20 (1994): 21-44; Faderman, *Odd Girls*; Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); and Gerard Sullivan, "Political Opportunism and the Harassment of Homosexuals in Florida, 1952-1965," *Journal of Homosexuality* 37 (1999): 57-81.

5. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, p. 6; William Eskridge Jr., *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 13; Paul Monette, *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 2; Joseph Beam, "Leaving the Shadows Behind," in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, ed. Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson, 1986), p. 16.

6. In his memoir, Mel White, the former ghostwriter for Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, movingly describes his experience of isolation: "I was isolated, not by bars or guards in uniforms, but by fear. I was surrounded by my loving family and close friends, but there was no way to explain to

them my desperate, lonely feelings even when we were together. I wasn't tortured by leather straps or cattle prods, but my guilt and fear kept me in constant torment. . . . I was starving for the kind of human intimacy that would satisfy my longing, end my loneliness." White says that this isolation made him "feel like an alien who had been abandoned on a strange planet. . . . Living rooms and dining rooms, restaurants and lobbies, became foreign, unfriendly places. [I grew] weary of pretending to be someone I was not, tired of hiding my feelings. . . . My once lively spirit was shriveling like a raisin in the sun. . . . Desperation and loneliness surged. . . . I felt trapped and terrified." Mel White, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America* (New York: Plume, 1995), pp. 123, 177-78.

7. Allan Berube describes the closet as a "system of lies, denials, disguises, and double entendres—that had enabled them to express some of their homosexuality by pretending it didn't exist and hiding it from view." Berube, *Coming Out under Fire*, p. 271.

8. My research suggests that the category of the closet initially appeared in the writing of gay liberationists. The earliest reference I've found was an "editorial" statement in the short-lived newspaper *Come Out!* in 1969. By the early 1970s the concept of the closet was widely circulating in liberationist writings; e.g., Signo Canceris, "From the Closet," *Fag Rag* 4 (January 1973); Bruce Gilbert "Coming Out," *Fag Rag* 23/24 (1976); Morgan Pinney, "Out of Your Closets," *Gay Sunshine* 1 (October 1970); Ian Young, "Closet Wrecking," *Gay Sunshine* 28 (Spring 1976); Jennifer Woodhul, "Darers Go First," *The Furies* 1 (June/July 1972); and Allen Young, "Out of the Closets, into the Streets," in *Out of the Closets*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young. The closet underscored a condition of oppression. Gays were not merely discriminated against but dominated. And the closet was not a product of individual ignorance or prejudice but a social system of heterosexual domination. The core institutions and culture of America were said to be organized to enforce the norm and ideal of heterosexuality. In short, the closet underscored the way a system of compulsory heterosexuality creates a separate and oppressed homosexual existence. By arguing that the very organization of American society compels homosexuals to live socially isolated, inauthentic lives, the category of the closet served both as a way to understand gay life and as a critique of America.

By the mid-1970s, as liberationism gave way to a politics of minority rights, the concept of the closet was in wide use. However, its meaning began to change. Within the minority rights discourse that triumphed in the late 1970s, the closet was viewed as an act of concealment in response to actual

or anticipated prejudice; it was seen as a matter of individual choice. By the late 1970s and 1980s, some gays were arguing that America had become a much more tolerant nation; the risks of coming out were greatly diminished. Being in or out of the closet was now seen as an individual choice rather than an adjustment to heterosexual domination. In fact, gays began to feel considerable pressure to come out, as many came to believe that visibility was both more possible and a key to challenging prejudice. For example, David Goodstein, the owner and editor of *The Advocate* from roughly the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, gravitated to a view of the closet as almost self-imposed, as a product of "low self-esteem" or "cowardice." "I truly believe that there is no reason for you to be closeted and hide who you are" (*The Advocate*, 1983, p. 6). Goodstein blamed social intolerance in part on the cowardice of those who choose to be closeted. "I take a dim view of staying in the closet. . . . What brings up my irritation at this time . . . is the price we uncloseted gay people pay for the cowardice and stupidity of our [closeted] brothers and sisters" ("Opening Spaces," *The Advocate*, 1981, p. 6).

I have stated my preference for a liberationist approach. If the concept of the closet is to help us to understand changes in gay life, it should be used in a way that indicates more than an act of concealment. In this regard, the liberationist idea of the closet as a condition of social oppression is persuasive. Explaining gay subordination, at least from the 1950s through the 1980s, as a product of individual prejudice or ignorance makes it hard, if not impossible, to understand its socially patterned character. It was not simply that gays were disadvantaged in one institution or only by isolated acts of discrimination or disrespect, but gay subordination occurred across institutions and culture. Heterosexual privilege was aggressively enforced by the state, cultural practices, daily acts of harassment and violence, and by institutions such as marriage, the wedding industry, and a dense network of laws covering taxes, family, immigration, military policy, and so on. At least during the heyday of the closet, the social risks of exposure were so great that it is naive to speak of the closet as an individual choice. In short, the concept of the closet helps us to understand the way heterosexuality functioned as an "institution" or a "system" that oppressed gay people.

A liberationist approach requires, however, some modification. In particular, the closet should be approached as a product of historically specific social dynamics; in particular, a culture of homosexual pollution and state repression. Furthermore, liberationists tend to read heterosexual domination as so closely and deeply intertwined with a whole system of gender, racial, economic, and political domination that

America is viewed as irredeemably repressive. Such totalizing views are not credible.

9. Class is absent from much of queer social analysis. There are theoretical and rhetorical appeals to the importance of class, but little social research that addresses class patterns of concealment and coming out, gay and lesbian identification, and workplace dynamics. I have made use of the following work: Nicole Field, *Over the Rainbow: Money, Clans, and Homophobia* (London: Pluto Press, 1995); Steve Valocchi, "The Class-Inflected Nature of Gay Identity," *Social Problems* 46 (1999): 207–44; Katie Gilmartin, "We Weren't Bar People: Middle Class Identities and Cultural Space," *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 3 (1996): 1–5; Roger Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and David Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1993). Joshua Gamson's *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Chrys Ingraham's *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999) weave class into an analysis of sexual identities in interesting ways. Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls, Twilight Lovers* and Kennedy and Davis's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* are indispensable sources for understanding the role of class in early postwar lesbian life.

10. There is a substantial theoretical and research literature on the role of gender in shaping patterns of sexual identification and dynamics of the closet and coming out. The literature of gay liberationism and lesbian feminism is crucial. On the tradition of lesbian feminism, see Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch, eds., *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*. (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975). For gay liberationism, see Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds., *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberationism*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992 [1972]). For more recent theoretical and empirical statements, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Biddy Martin, "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," *Diacritics* 24 (Summer 1994): 104–21; Chrys Ingraham, "The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender," in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996); Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus* (New York: New York University, 1990); Christine Williams and Arlene Stein, eds., *Sexuality and Gender* (Maiden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002); and Kath Weston, *Render Me, Gender Me: Lesbians Talk Sex, Class, Color,*