

# Cross-Atlantic Discourses in Celebrity Coming Out Stories

## The Neoliberal Cases of Ricky Martin and Tiziano Ferro

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### Introduction

The power to narrate, or to block other narrative from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process, many Europeans and Americans were also stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too fought for new narratives of equality and human community. (Said, 1993, pp. xii-xiii)

**I**N THIS TIME OF STUNNING POLITICAL INSTABILITY and unpredictability, the power to examine and critique both dominant and subjugated narratives—their local representations, historical patterns, and relationships to larger dominant discourses—is critical (Said, 1993). The historian Manning Marable (2007) reminds us of the difficulty but necessity of challenging our own and other people's stories in relation to on-going historical narratives; we can begin to reconceptualize the future only by first deeply examining the present in relation to the past (Sawyer, 2017; Sawyer & Laguardia, 2010). As Foucault (1972) has noted, today's social-political discourses are rooted in historically situated, on-going genealogies. That is, we are socialized within discourses that are rooted in historical narratives. Partly framing our work and perceptions, these discourses may predate and even foreshadow political ruptures.

In this inquiry, we surface discourses of sexuality written by two celebrities—Ricky Martin in the United States and Tiziano Ferro in Italy—in their formal coming out letters, which appeared in the popular media. Using conceptual frameworks for sexuality, homonormativity, and neoliberalism/new nationalism, we first delineate these discourses. We then examine resonances to a larger narrative of the on-going, yet changing, political landscape. Specifically, we examine the letters for resonances of both neoliberalism and now, as the world

enters a new political schism, the new nationalism. Furthermore, the identification of local variations within the letters (Gemignani, Brinkman, Benozzo, & Puebla, 2014) provides insight into the regional movement of the broader, transnational patterns of the larger, political discourses. We find these two singers interesting for a couple of reasons. First, as highly gifted singers—both of whom are Latin—who have both achieved exceptional success at different times in their careers, they are privileged, white males. This privilege is evident in the speed with which they achieved commercial success, their control over their own narratives, and their use of the media to legitimate and make significant their images. However, given national difference to ethnicity in general (in Italy, Latin males are dominant, but in the United States they are not) and homosexuality in particular (with the United States supporting marriage equity but Italy not doing so at the time of this writing), they are both positioned somewhat differently to that privilege. Second, as previously mentioned, their letters from two different geographic regions provide an opportunity for us to examine and compare local discourses. That celebrity coming-out announcements have become uncontroversial, almost routine, suggests that their embedded discourses may help norm political change.

We are motivated by the call of Weiss, Fine, and Dimitriadis (2009) for scholars to begin to delineate and map transnational patterns of the movement of neoliberalism (and now its unexpected unraveling into the new nationalism) on both sides of the Atlantic. (We intentionally do not use the term post-neoliberalism, which to us connotes the deconstruction of neoliberalism rather than, as we see, the reconstruction of an equally problematic ideology—the new nationalism.) We first present excerpts from the coming out letters of Tiziano Ferro and Ricky Martin. We then discuss and identify regulatory discourses (Foucault, 1990) and coming out formulas within their letters in relation to the literature on homonormativity and, by extension, neoliberalism and the new nationalism. While the relationship between homonormativity and neoliberalism has recently begun to be studied (e.g., Duggan, 2002; Marzullo, 2011), the relationship between homonormativity and the new nationalism has been less frequently examined. We consider the coming out letters important as cultural artifacts of self-representation within specific geographic locations (Italy and the USA) at a time of increasing tension related to globalization. Puar (2007) reminds us that events tied to large-scale discourses are not isolated and spontaneous; rather, they are complex assemblages of those discourses.

With this analysis, we seek to contribute to the growing body of literature of celebrity coming out narratives in the media (Benozzo, 2013; Brady, 2011; Dow, 2001; Herman, 2003, 2005; Kooijman, 2004; Rivera Santana, Vélez Agosto, Benozzo, & Colón De la Rosa, 2014; Sawyer, 2014; Motschenbacher, 2019), focusing on the discourses of identity, authenticity, liberation, and family, as well as to literature on neoliberalism/new nationalism, especially within a transnational setting. We conclude by discussing how Ferro's and Martin's rhetoric closes the doors of the closet behind an essentializing, new nationalistic discourse. We interpret the two letters neither as the authentic, transparent, and honest experience of the two celebrities, nor as the expression of their generosity of telling us their deep secrets (Benozzo, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2013), but instead as particular discursive regimes. Therefore, what we are interested in is not *if* and *how* Ferro and Martin felt free and liberated, but rather *how* they have produced their coming out as a liberation act that hides some and produces other power dynamics. We also, of course, do not consider them intentional advocates of any political stance.

## Method

For our methodology, we used critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 1992) to examine “concrete instances of discourse” as well as “the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse is a feature” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, pp. 448-449). Using CDA, we focused on the “linguistic practices that maintain and promote certain social relationships” (Íñiguez & Antaki, 1994, p. 3, as quoted in Rivera Santana et al., 2014, p. 6). This analysis was framed by Foucault’s (1990) perspective that power works through subjectivity. In relation to these letters, we suggest that Ferro and Martin cast themselves as subjects for and of societal and political (governmental) power—especially regulatory and normalizing patterns—within their texts (Peters, 2001).

Although there is a range of approaches to CDA, specifically, we drew from the three dimensions of CDA described by Fairclough (1992). These three dimensions (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, pp. 448-449) included, first, discourse-as-text. As discourse-as-text, we examined “the linguistic features and organization of concrete instances of discourse” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). Here, we blocked the text within the letters, focusing on the printed word and avoiding non-visible discourses (motivations, intensions, hopes, etc.). Doing a close reading, we established discourses within recurring patterns. Second, we considered discourse-as-discursive-practice, which is “discourse as something that is produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in society” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). For this aspect of discourse analysis, we examined the letters for aspects of consumerism. And last, we examined the letters for discourse-as-social-practice, which includes “the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse is a feature” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449). With this more critical aspect of discourse analysis, we examined the texts in relation to political meanings.

For our analysis on sexuality, we draw upon the work of Foucault (1990), Butler (1991), and Dow (2001), whose perspectives highlight sexuality as constructed and performative, nesting within an historical genealogy. We integrate the discussion of this framework into our analysis.

## The Letters Appear

On March 29, 2010, Ricky Martin, a well-known Puerto Rican/American pop singer—after 19 years in the spotlight and at the age of 39—through his twitter account and a letter on his blog announced his homosexuality, thus, coming out of the closet to his millions of fans. Then, six-months later, on October 6, an Italian pop singer, Tiziano Ferro—popular especially throughout Europe and Central and Latin America, at the age of 30—published his own coming-out letter in *Corriere della Sera*, a right center-wing Italian daily. Almost immediately, websites, TV channels, newspapers, and journals commented on and replayed their words. Shortly after publishing their letters, they both published their autobiographies. Their coming out in 2010 underscored Sedgwick’s (1990) still-critical words about the epistemology of the closet: “to the fine antennae of public attention the freshness of every drama of...gay uncovering seems if anything heightened in surprise and delectability, rather than staled, by the increasingly intense atmosphere of public articulations” (p. 67).

As celebrities and representatives of the popular media, Ferro and Martin are well positioned to contribute to “new” cultural norms found in the media about “changing” gay identity and its legitimate and respectable appearance (i.e., being the “the proper ‘gay subject,’” Roy, 2012, p. 185; see also Shugart, 2003). However, their coming out announcements carry a heavy price if they reify an evolving narrative of cultural stereotypes and narrow, commercial

representations of identity, norming more diverse representations of identity, community resistance, and grass-roots democracy. We now present excerpts from the letters.

### **Ricky Martin Comes Out<sup>1</sup>**

*A few months ago I decided to write my memoirs, a project I knew was going to bring me closer to an amazing turning point in my life. From the moment I wrote the first phrase I was sure the book was the tool that was going to help me free myself from things I was carrying within me for a long time. Things that were too heavy for me to keep inside. Writing this account of my life, I got very close to my truth....*

*For many years, there has been only one place where I am in touch with my emotions fearlessly and that's the stage. Being on stage fills my soul in many ways, almost completely. It's my vice. The music, the lights and the roar of the audience are elements that make me feel capable of anything.... But it is serenity that brings me to where I'm at right now. An amazing emotional place of comprehension, reflection and enlightenment. At this moment I'm feeling the same freedom I usually feel only on stage, without a doubt, I need to share. Many people told me: "Ricky it's not important", "it's not worth it", "all the years you've worked and everything you've built will collapse", "many people in the world are not ready to accept your truth, your reality, your nature." Because all this advice came from people who I love dearly, I decided to move on with my life not sharing with the world my entire truth.... Today I take full responsibility for my decisions and my actions.*

*...[my truth] fills me with strength and courage. This is just what I need especially now that I am the father of two beautiful boys that are so full of light.... To keep living as I did up until today would be to indirectly diminish the glow that my kids were born with. Enough is enough. This has to change. This was not supposed to happen 5 or 10 years ago, it is supposed to happen now. Today is my day, this is my time, and this is my moment.*

*These years in silence and reflection made me stronger and reminded me that acceptance has to come from within and that this kind of truth gives me the power to conquer emotions I didn't even know existed.*

*...writing this is a solid step towards my inner peace and vital part of my evolution. I am proud to say that I am a fortunate homosexual man. I am very blessed to be who I am.*

### **Tiziano Ferro Comes Out<sup>2</sup>**

*It was Dad who Persuaded me I Could do It  
by Tiziano Ferro*

*After so many years marred by attempts, restraint, excruciating expectation, efforts and bereavement, I was ready to stop singing. I was ready to throw away all the sacrifices I had made; my tears of hope, and my tears of joy, no longer meant anything. Even the satisfactions of my job and my dreams were overshadowed. What I heard in my head was: "If I'm homosexual, I can't live in this world." I felt like a child who had fallen to the ground, abandoned by his mother, defeated, who awaits his fate crying in despair. Music has always been the greatest hope for me, yet faced with my inability to find a way out, I was determined to let it go....*

*At that point I talked about it to my father, who said: "Listen, your life is special, because you are special. Learn to have respect for yourself. Your relief is my relief as well." That*

*was the final encouragement I needed to go all the way in a final attempt: I set out along a path on which I patiently learned to tackle obstacles, rather than to avoid dangers. I'm grateful to my father...and to all those who have stuck by me to this day.*

*Then I went to see Giulia Bongiorno, one of Italy's leading lawyers, for an opinion, help, advice, maybe just a word of encouragement. Subconsciously, I had turned to a criminal lawyer! As if my behaviours and thoughts were incriminating. As if my condition were a crime. And such a serious crime that it needed to be punished with the toughest sentence of all: to stop singing. When I got to Ms. Bongiorno's office I was nerve-racked, after a long sleepless night...all of a sudden she opened up a whole new world for me by saying, in a firm tone and with a frank expression on her face: "There's nothing better than to turn to a criminal lawyer when you don't need one"! I smiled at that. But not with my lips, or at least not only. I smiled inside: after so long, I felt a weight had lifted off my shoulders at last. I felt understood, supported. Maybe even protected...after so many years spent alone, in the trenches, trying to fathom where the enemy was hiding, only to reach the conclusion that I myself was my only enemy....*

### ***"If I am homosexual"***

#### **Rickymartinness and Tizianoferroness: Identity and Authenticity Discourses**

Martin's and Ferro's letters articulate identity and authenticity discourses often associated with coming out (Benozzo, Pizzorno, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015; Dow, 2001; Herman, 2003; Holt & Griffin, 2003). The identity discourse is expressed through Martin's words, "I am proud to say that I am a fortunate homosexual man." It is echoed by Ferro's "If I am homosexual...."<sup>3</sup> Through these sentences, Martin and Ferro constitute identity that did not exist before they wrote and published the letters. In naming themselves as "homosexual," they are giving life to themselves (Butler, 1999) and presenting the illusion of the existence of an inherent, deep, and essential homosexual self.

In Martin's letter, the identity discourse is clearly connected to a second well-known regulatory theme: the authenticity discourse. This point is apparent within a repetition when he states: "many people in the world are not ready to accept your truth," and further states, "Writing this account of my life, I got very close to my truth...this kind of truth gives me the power." It is also hinted at by Ferro when he writes, "I set out along a path on which I patiently learned to tackle obstacles." In his subsequent book, he explains this process as his undergoing psychotherapy to help with his journey to find himself. The authenticity discourse appeared in media commentary on Ferro's "confessional" book (Benozzo, 2013, p. 344).

The idea that coming out communicates an authentic, true, and unambiguous identity has been problematized in particular by poststructuralist scholars (Butler, 1991, 1999; Phelan, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). Referring to the work of Judith Butler, Herman (2005) reminds us that that "the 'I am' declaration is not so much a dead-end as a broken record, a performance endlessly repeated, leading nowhere" (p. 17). Identity and authenticity discourses presuppose an essentialist view, described by Fuss (1989) as "a belief in a true essence—that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing" (p. 2). To contrast with more fluid, unstable, and uncertain poststructuralist views of identity, we have labeled this essential view as "Tizianoferroness" and "Rickymartinness." Referring to such static views of identity, queer activists and theorists (e.g., Warner, 1993) have criticized the idea of a gay community confined to a prescribed and narrow view of homosexual identity or a commodified "gayness," thus, subjected to a normalizing process.

Following Foucault (1990), we read Martin's and Ferro's texts as confessional rituals through which the tellers produce a "true" discourse on sexuality and identity. The philosopher

argues that “from the Christian penance to the present days, sex was a privileged theme of confession” (p. 61), one that “was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse of sex” (p. 63). Framing coming out as a confessional ritual in Foucault’s terms clarifies how coming out implies a degree of power released to other subjects (sometimes virtual). According to Foucault (1990), confession is a discursive ritual, through which truth displays its authenticity as the subject eliminates resistance; for the confessors (Tiziano and Ricky), it “exonerates, redeems, and purifies...unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (p. 62). This last observation takes us to the liberation discourse, which is always intertwined with identity and authenticity discourses.

***“I’m feeling the same freedom”***  
**Liberation Discourses**

These letters, their discourses and their plot structures, evoke classic gay narratives that tell the story of a difference that must be recognized, accepted, and then publicly declared. The process results in a resolution: liberation! Indeed, echoing the third classical coming out rhetoric of liberation, Martin writes: “At this moment I’m feeling the same freedom I usually feel only on stage.” Ferro also evokes this excitement when he writes: “I felt a weight had lifted off my shoulders at last.” Zimmerman (1985, as quoted in Dow, 2001), analyzing the liberation function of lesbian coming out narratives, wrote:

speaking, especially naming oneself lesbian, is an act of empowerment. Power, which traditionally is the essence of politics, is connected with the ability to name, to speak, to come out of silence.... Powerlessness, on the other hand, is associated with silence and the “speechlessness” that the powerful impose on those dispossessed of language. (p. 127)

Martin especially described this empowerment as “an amazing emotional place of comprehension, reflection and enlightenment. At this moment I’m feeling the same freedom I usually feel only on stage, without a doubt, I need to share.” This statement is significant in that Martin expands this description by comparing the rush of emotions he experiences on stage with those he experienced as he composed his coming-out letter. But ultimately, this description is individualistic.

In contrast, Ferro’s empowerment came not from a sense of freedom, but rather one of filial encouragement. His father urged him to respect himself for being the *special* person he is and move forward. Ferro, then, decided to talk and tackle the obstacles of his life: “That was the final encouragement I needed to go all the way in a final attempt.... I’m grateful to my father.” Although the details differ, the logic of the two letters seems the same. Both Ferro and Ricky gave themselves a new voice centered on personal identity and freedom.

As we connect the liberation discourse in Martin’s and Ferro’s letters with classic coming out discourses, which evolved (especially in the USA, the UK, and Australia) in the 1960s and 1970s, we note a lack of political ethos in their letters. At that time, coming out was a political action. In 1970, for example, the *New York Times* offered the following “quote of the day” made by one of the organizers of the first Gay Pride March in New York City one-year after the Stonewall uprising:

We’re probably the most harassed, persecuted minority group in history, but we’ll never have the freedom and civil rights we deserve as human beings unless we stop hiding in closets and in the shelter of anonymity. (Gross, 2002, p. 43)

What is interesting in this quote is the explicit understanding that coming out of the closet in 1970 was considered a political event tied to freedom and civil rights, something which is completely removed from Martin's and Ferro's letters.

### **A Different Mixture in the Same Mold? Merciful Father Discourse and Counter-Criminal Discourse**

In view of our previous analysis, we can say that the two letters convey similar mixtures (identity, authenticity, and liberation discourses) in the same mold (the confessional ritual). These normative discourses resonate with discourses found within classic coming out narratives of the last century (Plummer, 1995). We can see that Ferro's case is framed by a *merciful father* discourse and a *counter criminal* discourse (Benozzo, 2013). The first discourse is that of the merciful father who accepts, approves, and protects him. In his letter, he situates and privileges patriarchy within multiple oppositions: between mother and father—"I felt like a child...abandoned by his mother..."—and between himself (the child) and his father (the adult). He assigns his father the role of the powerful parent in contrast to his mother, the evil parent who abandoned him. Ferro is able to talk "about [homosexuality] to" his father, who in turn asserts that Ferro is "special" and needs to "respect himself." It is a powerful father who, with a few choice words, heals a lifetime of anguish and despair. "That was the final encouragement I needed to go all the way in a final attempt." The merciful father discourse recalls the importance of the traditional, patriarchal, Italian family within the context of Italian Catholicism.

The comparative positioning of Martin and Ferro in relation to family connects yet differentiates the two letters. While Ferro reaches out to his father and mentions his mother within his confessional, Martin invokes the presence of his two sons. Referring to family, Ferro seeks protection, while Martin casts himself as protector and "spins" his confession into his powerful act of protecting his family.

Ferro also introduces a lawyer in his letter who gives voice to the counter criminal discourse. When Ferro visits Giulia Bongiorno, he positions himself as a guilty criminal "Subconsciously, I had turned to a criminal lawyer! As if my behaviours and thoughts were incriminating. As if my condition were a crime." This statement, full of behaviors, thoughts, and conditions, evokes the identity discourse (the condition is the one of *being homosexual*). It is interesting that Giulia Bongiorno implicitly cites the Italian law from 1861 that decriminalized sodomy in the north of Italy when she says: "There's nothing better than to turn to a criminal lawyer when you don't need one." She, thus, lightly with a few witty words dismisses any possible interpretation of criminality. But in the end, if the law doesn't condemn homosexuality, then the question of the basis of Ferro's guilt arises. His letter suggests that it is not the legal systems but (Catholic) morality that is responsible for his guilt. And he constructs his letter to oppose to this normative system

in such a way that Tiziano Ferro is not accused of a crime; instead he is shown to be innocent, not guilty. The whole narrative structure...aims to legitimize and to protect him, to decriminalize his homosexuality. On the one hand the letter revokes and tries to oppose Lombroso's (1906) 19<sup>th</sup>-century idea of homosexual as *homo criminalis* and, on the other, it plays on a reference to the meaning of the opposite of "criminal," i.e. "innocent" (not guilty) that...connect the text to Catholic rhetoric. Innocent is he who has committed no sins and is therefore free from guilt. (Benozzo, 2013, p. 10)

We want to underline here that, by projecting his story through the voice of his father and his lawyer, Ferro allows these actors to define regulatory societal norms, reinforcing an external locus of power. Interweaving these two discourses into the plot of the letter, Tiziano Ferro “can [now] live in this world,” even if he is homosexual. Ironically, this confession leads to confinement and not liberation. This action is clarified by Foucault (1990) who maintained that, instead of liberating, the act of confession releases the confessor to the hands of another power (here, the father and the lawyer).

Ultimately, Ferro’s and Martin’s coming out letters are not positioned to challenge and possibly change societal norms, but to remain regulated by them. Interestingly, both letters are totally removed from a context of desire or sexuality. They do not discuss sex, lovers, or passion in any way except for their love of their art. Lacking desire, their declaration, thus, lacks an anticipated action. The messy, dangerous, and possibly inherently democratizing expression of sexuality, threatening to the design of neoliberalism, is missing. This last observation introduces the next section of our paper: the consistencies between discourses and neoliberalism that can be found from what is absent within their documents.

### Coming Out into a Socio-Political World

To understand Martin’s and Ferro’s relationship to the concept of homonormativity, we first quickly review the uneven movement of neoliberalism to the new nationalism. We then discuss the relationship between neoliberalism and (more tentatively) post-neoliberalism to homonormativity.

Bourdieu (1998) described neoliberalism in both actual and symbolic terms: “Neoliberalism is a powerful economic theory *whose strictly economic strength, combined with the effect of theory, redoubles the force of the economic realities it is supposed to express*” (p. 126, emphasis in original). The core tenets of neoliberalism revolve around public and commercial forms of freedom: “deregulation, privatization, ‘openness’ (to foreign investment, to imports), unrestricted movement of capital, and lower taxes” (Finnegan, 2003, pp. 41-42).

Framed by this notion of freedom, neoliberalism itself has become a near universal belief, a sort of gospel. Bourdieu (1998) thought that

This gospel, or rather the soft vulgate which is put forward everywhere under the name of liberalism, is concocted out of a collection of ill-defined words—“globalization,” “flexibility,” deregulation” and so on—which through the liberal or libertarian connotations, may help give the appearance of a message of freedom and liberation to a conservative ideology which thinks itself opposed to all ideology. (p. 126)

The slow growth of the new nationalism—although seemingly exploding into popular awareness—has not so much replaced neoliberalism, but developed alongside it, at times almost in a schizophrenic way. Overnight, both the United Kingdom and the United States appeared to flip from embracing a global, neoliberal perspective to a rough-and-tumble nationalistic, populist perspective. Emerging patterns in the new political landscape contradict and challenge certain tenets of neoliberalism: instead of the free movement of goods and workers, there is discussion of a growth in tariffs and the restriction of immigration; instead of a philosophy of globalism, there is an emphasis on economic nationalism. The new nationalism—also known as populism and nativism—marks the return of class to the political landscape. The dissatisfaction among people increasingly cast into poverty as result of the neoliberal project played a potent role in both Brexit and the U.S. election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Also, there is an explicit goal of reducing taxes (favoring the

wealthy more than the poor). Finally, these negative policies are accompanied by a loud, triumphant nationalism (e.g., “Make America Great Again”). Harris notes that neoliberalism was an open ideology; whereas, post-neoliberalism is a closed ideology (Harris, 2017). Instead of a sense of openness for the hybridity of border crossings, post-neoliberalism emphasizes core nationalism and intolerance of difference. One of the clearest signs of the official failure of neoliberalism may be found in its criticism by leading scholars (Jacques, 2017).

It is important to note that nativist populism is not a new phenomenon, but rather appears periodically in American and European history. An obvious example in Italy was the Mussolini era (currently followed by the Five Star Movement led by Bebbe Grillo). In the United States, Trump governs in the authoritarian tradition of Nixon, Goldwater, and Wallace. The point is, a narrative of nativist populism runs through American and Italian history. Those of us who grew up in the U.S. or Italy are positioned in multiple ways to the discourses running through this history.

The third piece of our discussion is homonormativity. A close relative of neoliberalism, homonormativity has been described as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). Homonormativity emerged from the conflict between neoliberalism and the public expression of LGBTQ rights. Many conservative supporters of neoliberalism were caught in the dilemma of wishing to promote the libertarian aspects of neoliberalism found in unregulated individual rights and freedom of public expression while at the same time seeking to regulate diverse representations of LGBTQ identity, both in the public sphere. A solution to this dilemma was found in the promise of gay marriage, offering, as it did, a new site for privacy found in domesticity.

According to Duggan (2002), the gay marriage discourse allowed conservative gays (almost all men) to shift the focus of freedom from the public sphere to the domestic and the home. This shift is reflected in the watering down of gay pride parades, for example, where corporate sponsorships have replaced rebellious behavior, and marriage equity has placed a new emphasis on family and the home (the “new normal”). This reframing of LGBT freedom as a domestic freedom led to a curious inversion of public/private influence. And from this dynamic, two leading social forces of homonormativity emerged: gay domesticity and consumerism.

Both of these forces of homonormativity are evident in the two letters. Limiting their attention to an “authentic self,” both Ferro and Martin emphasized different yet consistently individualistic aspects of domesticity in their documents. As Martin showcases his children and Ferro follows the wise words of his father, their rhetoric locates their “gay selves” in the home, not in the streets.

As part of this focus on domesticity, they both introduce strong normative statements into their messages. Ferro projects normativity through his father’s words. His father tells him that his [Ferro’s] life and “all life is special,” giving him “the final encouragement [he] needed to go all the way in a final attempt.” He ends his letter by stating, “Silence is precious.” Martin was a little less subtle. Referring to his children, he states, “acceptance has to come from within and that this kind of truth gives me the power to conquer emotions.” While these statements are more normative than moral, their regulative nature is similar to that of moral statements, adding guiding principles to neoliberalism and homonormativity. Consistent with the normative nature of neoliberalism (which appears at times more like normative life than ideology), they co-opt ideology (Robinson, 1996) and facilitate evolution through hegemony, not coercion (Foucault, 1972; McLaren, 1998; Peters, 2001). However, we wonder whether the contained, reactionary normativity of these statements suggest discourses more consistent with an emerging nationalism than with a complex globalism.

An analysis of the second aspect of homonormativity, consumerism, is revealing. As Holt and Griffin (2003) wrote “Advertisers and marketers encourage subjects to discover and ‘be themselves’ through practices of acquisition and consumption” (p. 406). And in the late twentieth century, advertisers specifically targeted lesbians and gay men as consumers (Chasin, 2000; Sender, 2004). Ferro and Martin do not cast themselves as consumers within their letters (except as consumers of ideology), but rather as producers of commodified art. As leading figures of popular culture, they focus their discussion on their art and careers (that is, the production of cultural products). Ferro, for example, discussed how his homosexuality led him to this consideration: “I was ready to stop singing.” This comment implies that, by coming out, he can continue to sing and be a popular artist, benefiting both himself and his record company. Martin, equally concerned about his career, stated in his letter, “Many people told me: ‘Ricky, it’s not important’, ‘it’s not worth it’, ‘all the years you’ve worked and everything you’ve built will collapse.’” At first heeding their advice, Martin remained in the closet: “Because all this advice came from people who I love dearly, I decided to move on with my life not sharing with the world my entire truth.” However, he decided to reveal his “truth,” avowing: “Today I take full responsibility for my decisions and my actions.” As with Ferro, his career was in the foreground. And, in contrast to artists who provide audiences with new perspectives to queer normative spaces and reconstruct society as a more just place, such as Boy George and Sandra Bernhard, they promote a form of homonormativity focused on narrow views of identity and meanings of being “gay.” Instead of offering new views of personal and collective expression, Martin and Ferro use the media to package and sell themselves. Neither of them strongly and unwaveringly takes up a position against homophobia or discrimination, and in particular, Ferro does not criticize the Catholic Italian context. In both letters, coming out is resolved in an individualistic act without a reference, for example, to an LGBTQ world that struggles for the recognition for equal rights.

On a more theoretical level, their letters offer insight about the dilemma between both expanding personal freedom and containing it in the public sphere. Peters (2001) writes that, within the production of neoliberal behavior, one thematic emphasis became a project of self-improvement, an embodied “enterprise form” (p. 60) within neoliberalism, underscored by a sense of morality. Peters references Burchell’s (1996, p. 275) remark “made in the context of a Foucauldian analysis of neo-liberalism that an ‘enterprise form’ is generalized to all forms of conduct” (p. 60). In and through their letters, Ferro and Martin reconceptualize themselves as enterprise zones. Unlike Foucault’s (1972) conception that transformation comes in relation to critique and disruption, Ferro and Martin instead tether specific aspects of their statements to the themes of self-responsibility for personal improvement, domesticity, and consumerism. Peters (2001) states:

A genealogy of the entrepreneurial self reveals that it is the relationship, promoted by neo-liberalism, that *one establishes to oneself* through forms of personal investment (for example, user charges, student loans) and insurance that becomes the central ethical component of a new individualised and privatised consumer welfare economy. (p. 60, emphasis in original)

Indeed, their coming out letters can almost be read as manifestos of lifelong learning.

While at first glance this message of self-improvement appears laudable, it is, we suggest, an elitist message from two privileged, white males that is eminently self-serving. Bourdieu (1998) asks, “How do we...[become] free from all dependence on any of the imperialisms—starting with the imperialism that affects cultural production and...national and nationalist residues?” (p. 129). Adapting and applying this question to Martin’s and Ferro’s texts reveals a genealogy of meritocracy, privilege, and entitlement. This imperialism reifies

art that is centered on essentialism and normativity, a related lack of inherent pluralism, a tacit call to shift from extended public action to private family domesticity. The letters do not promote the diversity of gay life and a queering of society offering the hope of a form of grounded democracy and critique. Instead of critique and deconstruction, there is essentialism and closed statements that exclude others. We tentatively suggest similarities between discourses about essentialism within the letters and those within post-neoliberalism. Such a similarity may be found, for example, between the new nationalism's emphasis of monolithic identity and Martin's announcement of essentialism—his commitment to an inner truth and an authoritative lack of ambiguity. Essentialism is a discourse of chasms, not intersections, bordered spaces, not hybrid ones.

The two letters differ, however, in one key aspect of the new post-neoliberalism: self-reliance/responsibility. While neoliberalism certainly privileged responsibility, it was a more global and trans-border view of responsibility. As evidenced by the Brexit movement and the rhetoric coming from the United States, the notion of responsibility has shifted to a narrow view of personal gain and local (even class-based) agency. There is a pronounced discourse of contained self-responsibility within especially Martin's letter. His missive reads like a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the Horatio Alger story. Throughout his letter, he uses words and images that underscore agency and decisiveness. In the first paragraph alone, to paraphrase his words, he decides, frees himself, engages in purposeful action (and tool use), and engages in certainty. Throughout, he juxtaposes his coming out with his being on stage, where, as he states, he is "fearless: the music, the lights and the roar of the audience are elements that make me feel capable of anything. This rush of adrenaline is incredibly addictive." He uses a construction metaphor to describe his actions: he is warned that if he tells the truth, all that he has "built will collapse." And in case he is not clear that these are statements of self-responsibility, he leaves no ambiguity: "Today I take full responsibility for my decisions and my actions." His truth "fills [him] with strength and courage." The new nationalism emphasizes a self-contained form of reliance, as reflected in the island-mentality of people calling for Brexit or of those in the U.S. clambering to build an improved border wall. Ferro, on the other hand, bases in his decision on both legal and familial advice, coming respectively from lawyer and father.

While we have shown that there are strong homonormative elements also in Ferro's letter, there are differences between the two singers' letters and their own positionality to self-reliance. We are not suggesting that Martin's self-reliance indicates that he is anti-immigration (a conclusion not evident within his letter), but rather that his discourse of self-reliance resonates with an individualistic and not a collective view of improvement. We wonder if this contrast between the two singers possibly speaks to the opportunistic nature of political change, which seemingly may adapt to a local context. It is as if the text of their letters creates a slightly different proselytizing context for neoliberalism on both sides of the Atlantic.

In addition to self-responsibility, the use of technology, central to both letters, presents another dimension of the production and dissemination of neoliberalism. Referring to technology and economic growth, Peters (2001) notes the "increasing importance of...technology as the engine of economic growth and the means by which countries can successfully compete in the global economy in years to come" (p. 65). If you substitute the word "individuals" for "countries," this quote becomes an apt characterization of Ferro and, especially, Martin. As they published their letters online (with Ferro uploading an English language version to his website), the electronic, social medium became part of their message. Both project images of new enterprising selves, rooted in a tradition of progress. Intertwining the values of family and religion around their message of self-enterprise, they project the power of neoliberalism through their subjectivity and put a human face on a powerful metanarrative. This metanarrative is based on a vision of the future, one sustained by "excellence," by "technological literacy," by "performance," and by "enterprise" (Peters, 2001, p. 66). As with

neoliberalism, this narrative promises a happy and productive life for some and a disposable future in the new global economy for those on the margins (Bales, 2012).

Again, Ferro's and Martin's positionality as relatively privileged, white men reinforces these dominant discourses. The narrowness of Ferro and Martin's views can be delineated when comparing them to people who consider coming out in relation to complex and multiple intersections of identity. Decena (2008) writes of the complexity of coming out within an American Latino community, where there are "existing and emerging contradictions in the politics of gender and sexuality in immigrant communities" (p. 36). One wonders how Ferro's and Martin's letters might have been different had Ferro or Martin been disabled, or living in poverty, or female, or in their teens and homeless, or transgendered, for example. A second consideration of the normative framing is in their communicative context, that they advertise their reception. Their letters are almost intended to reassure others like themselves—white, privileged, male, early middle-aged—that they are not different but the new normal. Instead of queering a space, they settle and calm it.

By reproducing broader, neoliberal (or new nationalism) discourses, they advertise their own reception within those frameworks. Advertisements of normativity fit neatly into a context of neoliberalism and extend its genealogy. People, however, can resist normativity and disciplinary discourses. Foucault (1972) has acknowledged a tension between determinism and human agency. The diverse LGBTQ "community," has clearly shown that agency does exist. It existed in the riots at Stonewall in the United States, and it existed in the lengthy battles in Italy against the Catholic Church to finally obtain civil partnerships in 2016. Curriculum theorists and related scholars provide a rich scholarship of ways to disrupt authoritative, hegemonic texts and begin to generate self-and-collective reflexivity, praxis, and change.

### Final Thoughts

In this paper, we have analyzed two celebrities' coming out documents, developing our discussion along three principal lines: 1) the discourses that characterized these coming out stories (their mixture); 2) their shapes/molds; and 3) their context of neoliberal/new nationalism and (homo)normativity. We unfolded these discourses along different yet intertwined threads: discourses of liberation, discourses of identity/authenticity, and discourses of patriarchal family ties. These discourses function to make acceptable and to justify homosexuality not just in Italy and the United States, but throughout the world. Discourses of identity and authenticity in particular originate from the belief that subjects have a (sexual and psychological) self that, once discovered, can be controlled, managed, and (perhaps) changed. In substance, these discourses derive from the idea that subjectivity is independent from the social/political context, from social pressure, and from those cultural constructions that in the last two centuries have created/fabricated homosexual identity.

We also have suggested that essentializing discourses exist within their letters. Foreclosing more intersectional views of identity, these discourses resonate with the closed ideology of the new nationalism. This is an ideology that first constructs binaries (us/them), reinforcing "*ressentiment*, or the practice in which one defines one's identity through the negation of the other," (Matus & McCarthy, 2003, p. 75). It also resists the hybridity of globalism and the possibility of creating generative third spaces.

A concluding thought is that we cannot interpret Ferro's and Martin's coming out letters without taking into account the power mechanisms that delimit their statements. That is, their coming out of the closet represents their entrance into particular discursive regimes (such as identity, authenticity, liberation, counter-criminal, merciful father, patriarchal family) (Benozzo, Koro-Ljungberg, & Carey, 2016). Embedding their coming out stories within

discourses of authenticity/identity, they present themselves as the main protagonists of their stories if not their lives. Ironically, these discourses themselves operate to mask inherent power regimes that reduce their personal agency. To continue to repeat the identity discourse has two consequences. On the one hand, it depoliticized Ferro's and Marin's action: in the two stories we do not see any connection with gay and lesbian politics. These coming out narratives are self-centered and divorced from any form of advocacy for LGBTQ community rights. On the other hand, the very repetition of the self-narrative diverts the readers' attention from the central heterosexist and heteronormative contexts that produce these stories. For example, in Ferro's case, nothing is said about homosexual discrimination in Italy—the identity discourse removes the heterosexist Italian context from the consideration of the newspaper's gay and straight readers.

In conclusion, the process of coming out of the closet may actually reify many of the normative and normalizing discourses that lead to its construction as a defense mechanism in the first place. When we first read Tiziano Ferro's and Ricky Martin's letters, we applauded on one level the “courage” of these writers who were working in a very public forum. But on closer inspection, as we deconstructed the letters' underlying discourses, we became deeply disturbed. The letters operate on both a local and global level. Because the personal messages of the two documents reflect different national contexts, they increase their local persuasiveness. But, given the international reach of the two artists, the letters also communicate globally. As we have attempted to show in this paper, the global message is consistent with the discourse of neoliberalism and in some instances the new nationalism, as well as homonormativity; as the letters appeared locally, they also communicated political discourses both locally and globally.

### Notes

1. Published online on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2010 (Accessed August 25, 2014). It is reproduced with exact wording and grammatical construction as the original.
2. This letter was published the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 2010 in *Corriere della Sera* (p. 45), and a few days later, this English version appeared on the singer's official website.
3. Some may argue that “If I am homosexual” is not an affirming statement; however, it must be put in connection with the interviews that Ferro gave on the same days (published in *La Repubblica*) or with other comments within the same pages. For space reasons we do not include the text of the interview or other comments because the aim of the paper is to enter into a conversation between the two letters. The interview and comments can be found in Benozzo, 2013, p. 344.

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