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ESSAY

Role Model

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Abstract

The coming out narrative has served as the quintessential gendered life story for at least two decades, and people's decisions to come out publicly have contributed to a growing acceptance of homosexuality during that period. I argue, though, that the coming out narrative has been mapped onto the conversion narrative, which casts the 'closeted' pre-conversion queer as cowardly and dishonest; only when she does her duty and shoulders the burden of announcing her desire to curious straight people does she join the ranks of the honest, the brave, and the saved. Jodie Foster's 2013 'not-coming-out' speech drew criticism and ridicule, not least because she tried to subvert the conventions of the narrative in ways that protected herself, capitalized on gains made by activism to which she had contributed nothing, and trivialized 'outing,' which still kills. I was one of the few who felt freed by her non-coming-out speech, and twelve years later, I acknowledge that some people feel betrayed while I felt liberated. Femmes like me are overrepresented on screen, yet I've struggled with belonging. By interrogating the structures that underlie the coming out story, as well as the assumptions we make about categories and majority groups, this essay reckons with the complexities of femme visibility, cisgender privilege, coming out, and belonging in the queer community.

Keywords

Lesbian; Queer Belonging; Cyprus; Coming Out; Femme Visibility

> Jodie Foster has made a career of defying gender norms
>
> —Lynn Stahl (2016: 50)

It's July, high season, and I'm on a lesbian beach thinking about Jodie Foster. She'd like it here, I think, in Sappho's birthplace. The sunshine, palm trees, and dry air recall the Los

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Angeles where she's lived almost all her life. The food is delicious, and everywhere I go I see women like us. Behind me in the beach bar, dozens of attractive women laugh, drink coffee, eat eggs, discuss plans for more documentaries about lesbians. Before me stretches the sea and in it bob more women.

It's a thrilling (and kind of bizarre) privilege to be writing this essay about lesbian (in)visibility in the birthplace of Sappho. Each morning, before I sit down at this beach bar to write, I join fifteen or twenty women in their group swim to a large rock (a micro-island?) and back. A kayak accompanies the women since there are no lifeguards. After we've returned, we are led in a ceremony of congratulations for swimmers who've returned from the rock for the first time this season.

On my first morning here, I slipped into my swimsuit, walked past Sappho Travel, Sappho Real Estate, and a statue of Sappho, then over to the area where other women were slathering on sunscreen, wriggling out of shorts, and adjusting snorkels. I shivered into the chilly water and began the swim. I watched for urchins as I stood up near the big rock, and then rested against it for a moment, making small talk with the other women there. Back on shore, all the swimmers joined hands, then clapped as the other first-time-this-season swimmers received a laminated paper 'medal,' and the group leader declared us each a 'Sappho Siren and graduate of the School of Sappho, class of 2025.' As we said goodbye, we dropped coins into the Skala Women's Rock Group donation jar to support a local animal rescue.

Most often, I seem to be the only woman in the group who speaks Greek. On average, about half the women look gay—close-cropped hair, swimming trunks, tattoos. Someone noted my hands once, which I took to mean that my nails are short. While the group doesn't have 'lesbian' in its name, social media photos feature an enormous rainbow flag and mottos like 'enter the water with pride.' During a group photo, a woman's breast fell out of her top, and someone yelled, 'every woman here would be delighted to help you put it back in!' Everyone laughed.

Two islands ago, at a conference on nearby Psara, a friend asked why I would be going to Lesbos before Cyprus, where I'd lived before moving back to the US. 'I like being in the majority,' I answered. She took a beat to recall that I'm a lesbian, but then laughed and said I should always use that answer to get people to think about the pleasures of belonging to a dominant group.

Of course, people do it all the time—travel somewhere to join a majority. They attend conventions or sporting events, often traveling for days to join like-minded enthusiasts. Jodie Foster has delighted in finding herself among the smart, driven, book-loving, young majority at Yale, and she takes ski trips with people who share her love of skiing.

On this particular lesbian beach, I assume that people assume I, too, am a lesbian, and because of how I look, it's the only place in the world where that happens. I can't explain why I've never wanted to connect my outfits or hairdos with the fact that I started noticing, in junior high, how pretty the girls were. I can't figure out the logic at all, really, behind my preferences. I want people to know I'm a lesbian, but I don't take steps to make that happen. Almost like I'm nostalgic for the feeling I had as a teenager, when who people thought I was matched what I knew about myself—I was a girl, I was Greek Cypriot, and English was my mother tongue. Other Greek Cypriots would hear my accent in Greek and assume I'm British, like my dad was when he was a child and Cyprus was still a British colony. They would assume I grew up in England, like most of the Cypriot diaspora, and that was the extent of the misreadings I experienced before I realized I was gay.

I was twenty-seven when I came out to a friend for the first time. Six years later, just before Foster's speech, I'd made a list of the thirty-three people I'd come out to so far. Then, twelve years in, I felt I was done, at long last, when I came out to my mother a few months shy of forty.

Famously on screen since age three, when she took her brother's role in a Coppertone commercial and insisted on shooting the scene topless, Foster's speech pleaded for privacy and then built up to an anticlimactic announcement of 'I'm single,' in a parody of a coming-out speech. I loved it. My journal the

morning of January 14, 2013 records, 'Yesterday was a big night for me.' Nothing big happened—I just had big feelings. I was thrilled and overwhelmed and also comforted. Foster mirrored my discomfort and also mirrored something else. I wrote, 'I don't think of her as a love object because she is too close to what I aspire to be myself, mainly feminine but with an edge of masculinity .' And I went on, 'It's been a comfort to me (however seemingly silly) to watch her movies from that time (*Foxes*, from when she was 18) and think that while she was carrying on with those movies, she was going through what I am doing now. And it took her a long time' (2013).

Though I didn't read any at the time, I've since learned that dozens of articles appeared the same Monday that I wrote that journal entry. Sam Leith performed a rhetorical analysis of her 'genius' using the words 'anaphora,' 'polysyndeton,' and 'occultation' (Leith 2013). Matthew Breen of *The Advocate* complained that Monday of 'too much anger' (Breen 2013). Deb Baer expressed an anger of her own at Foster for taking so long to say so little (Baer 2013). Bret Easton Ellis compared her to a toddler (Ellis 2013). A week later, Steven Petrow said she'd done harm (Petrow 2013). I watched *The Accused* and felt that Foster depicted the 'helpless voicelessness' I felt. I journaled, 'I don't know if it was that shot of Kelly McGillis and Jodie Foster grasping hands, or the moments when they looked at each other in understanding … I feel that she has battled for us in ways that aren't appreciated' (2013).

During my twelve-year coming out, I hunted down coming out stories as if they held a key to unlock my own little cell—jail cell, nun's cell, I don't know. I wanted them to show me a world where what I felt was as natural as it had seemed when my physical delight in the female form first blossomed. They disappointed. I launched an investigation into how the coming out script mapped onto narratives of conversion or sinner-to-saint redemption. Coming out stories agreed to the majority's terms: 'normal' straights say nothing; deviants must announce themselves. Another critique of Foster's 2013 speech argued that she should have said 'Yep, I'm gay' like Ellen, who in her eponymous 1997 cover story assumes the burden of making explicit something the prurient public had already deduced (Portwood 2013). *Entertainment Weekly* approved: 'DeGeneres allowed herself to become a poster girl—not for lesbianism, but for honesty' (Schwarzbaum 1997). In calling DeGeneres the poster girl for honesty, *Entertainment Weekly* casts the silent queer as a dishonest coward, as though I'd hidden a dirty secret from a world entitled to know what kind of body makes me burn.

People are supposed to be happier after they are redeemed. George Michael, a fellow English-speaking queer with a Cypriot father, shocked people when he said his life got worse after coming out—after he lost the privileges of being an assumed member of the dominant, normal majority. Since the coming-out narrative follows the script of the conversion narrative of a sinner who found Jesus, it's taboo for Michael to state that life was better before (HELLO! 2014).

To make sense of this, I did lots of reading about coming out and conversion narratives over a series of years, but all along I could have read a *HuffPost* article published on the Tuesday after Foster's not- coming-out. Dustin Bradley Goltz, a communication professor at DePaul, wrote that 'Foster exposed and disrupted a ritualized performance that has become expected, predictable, and, perhaps, mandated in mainstream media: the coming out speech' (Goltz 2013). He described its trajectory just as I had. 'The speech expresses childhood pain, marks how family saved them, subtly pleads for audience acceptance,' he writes, and refines what I had figured out, stating that the queer who comes out according to the script is offering 'a promise to be a must-see TV shining model of marriage and procreation in a manner that will not offend conservative sensibilities' (Goltz 2013). A year later, Goltz refined his thinking into an article I needed but wouldn't read for a decade—Goltz felt the liberation I felt when he heard Foster's subversions. He called them 'delightfully queer violations' (Goltz 2014: 181).

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On Lesbos, from my seat on a stool with my back to the rest of the beach bar, I gaze over the top of my computer at the Aegean Sea that divides the island from the nearby Turkish mainland and think about its beauty, and its danger. How many people distantly related to me drowned here during the scenes that Ernest Hemingway so famously described in 'On the Quai at Smyrna'? My mom's father, Spyros, was born a Turkish citizen in Constantinople, when it was still called that. He was a citizen, but because he had been baptized Orthodox Christian, he was a minority and fled to Greece—maybe here to Lesbos, maybe to Athens; we'll never know. What I do know is that all sixteen of my great-great-grandparents were born in the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey, Greece, Albania, and Cyprus). If they'd all opted into the Muslim majority, as many Christians did for tax breaks, job options, marriage opportunities, and protection from arbitrary state violence, my people might have stayed put. All the people who gave rise to me could have still met, and I could have still been born, probably in Turkey, where I'd be speaking Turkish now and worshipping Allah.

Like Iraq and Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan (there was a Cisjordan!), Cyprus was Ottoman in the nineteenth century and then British in the twentieth. British rulers intentionally stoked divisions between groups—in Cyprus, between the Greek-speaking Orthodox majority and the Turkish-speaking Muslim minority. Eventually, the British loosened their grip and allowed nation-states to form, but not every identity got a nation. The Kurds don't have a state, nor do the Druze or the Assyrians. Cypriots have a state, but when Greek Cypriots rebelled against Britain, they fought for union with Greece; Cyprus is a state the rebels didn't want. I'd like to be recognized as part of a category of gynophiles, perhaps a global majority, since it includes most men. But it's unrecognized, like Kurdistan. All such classifications are figments of our imagination that exert life-and-death material power. Peace depends on dominant majorities wielding power without violence.

Though gynophiles don't (yet) exist, I have real privilege that comes from passing for straight, from being educated, and from being racialized as white. Jodie Foster got a lot of flack for failing to use her privilege to help others. One scholar writes, 'Foster's reticence about being visible feels like a retreat into the privileges that being monied, gender-conforming, and white produce' (Johnson and Pérez 2014: 201). In that very retreat, though, Foster mirrored me; I had spent the first six years of my coming-out era convincing myself that it's not monstrous to notice a woman's exquisite anatomy, and Foster's halting speech gave me permission to fully feel my years of fear. I had longed and longed and longed for a role model, and here I was, cheering for Jodie Foster's right not to be mine.

What the complaint about Foster's privilege ignores is that she was supporting her entire family by age eight. Jodie Foster believed that acting for money to pay the family bills was her responsibility. If Jodie Foster's family had had wealth privilege, she might have never appeared in the Coppertone ad that launched her. After college, Foster took the GRE to get a PhD in English. Yes—Foster wanted to keep writing in the vein of her undergraduate thesis, the one Henry Louis Gates supervised and Toni Morrison contributed to by granting the twenty-two-year-old a personal interview. I almost titled this essay 'Jodie Foster Wanted to Be a Fucking English Professor.' Her Oscar for *The Accused* lured her back to Hollywood, but in almost every interview she insists that she's not built for acting, that she was put into the job by a parent in the same way that, as teens, my brother got dropped off at a restaurant to bus tables, and I was sent to be a secretarial assistant. Jodie Foster is wealthy now because, as a kid, she worked.

When femme lesbians like Foster and I pass, and don't use our privilege for the good of others, we are opting out of sacrifice. In Ottoman Cyprus, thousands of Christians (Orthodox and especially Catholic) opted out of minority status by pretending to convert to Islam. They were named 'Linen-Cotton-Wearers,' since they 'wore' one religious identity on the outside, but had a Christian underlayer. Historians say they were resented by Cypriots who stayed Christian and suffered penalties for that choice. I wonder what could be made of an analogy between femmes and the Linen-Cotton-Wearers. Maybe nothing. If I could have

my way, everyone would stop privilege-shaming and focus on extending the safety enjoyed by the privileged group to all people.

Jodie Foster was tomboyish as a kid, and her spunky, boyish affect may have earned her a good deal of her early success. My favorite scholarly article on Foster is Lynne Stahl's magnificent 'Chronic Tomboys: Feminism, Survival, and Paranoia in Jodie Foster's Body of Work.' Stahl posits that Foster's work can 'subvert normative tropes of gender, reproduction, and emotion' through her 'chronically tomboyish embodiment' (Stahl 2016: 51). Stahl's close reading of *Panic Room* shows how the film subverts the trope of 'tomboy taming' (2016: 52). The trope is all too familiar to those of us excited by Anne's love for her bosom friend Diana, and dejected by Anne's marriage to Gilbert, or Laura's to Almanzo, or Jo's to Professor Bhaer. Because Foster's character Meg is a tomboy who dared to grow up, she allows 'female gender deviance to endure on-screen in a manner distinct from spinsterhood or phallicism or butchness' (Stahl 2016: 51).

Jodie Foster took roles that felt right to her, and there's something about her embodiment in those films that produces what Stahl claims to be a subtle feminist resistance, and that mirrors something about me. I should clarify that I look nothing like Foster. I'm an inch taller. Foster wears contact lenses unless she's directing, whereas I only wear mine to party or swim. People guess I'm from Spain or Peru; in Turkey, I blend in as well as I do in Greece and Cyprus. Foster's northern European roots are obvious in her tiny nose, her little jaw, her freckles, and ice-blue eyes; my body only produces shades of caramel or olive. Her blonde hair is straight, whereas mine ranges from curls to frizz. All the same, I wrote: 'I always claimed to be entirely femme, but as I discovered when I fell into obsession with Jodie Foster, what attracts me … in a woman who can be a model-me … is an appearance of femininity that is a kind of drag for masculinity underneath. The way I like being at home without my shirt, the way when I am working out I like making it obvious that I do not need a bra' (2013). When I was writing those words, I felt ravenous for representation, and the couple of little snippets of film I'd seen were like a single potato chip or blueberry that only made my appetite more keen.

Foster has achieved her level of celebrity without playing a conventional romantic lead beyond *Sommersby* (1993) and *Anna and the King* (1999). We might say she's achieved stardom in spite of her failure to play a convincing straight lady—but Stahl asks if maybe we could assign the star a little more agency. 'By perpetually declining to play it straight,' Stahl writes, 'Foster disrupts heteronormative trajectories and expectations … offering instead bare looks at the ramifications of being a nonnormative female in the US sex/gender system' (Stahl 2016: 63). Stahl and other scholars demonstrate that while Foster was silent about her own desire, she played her own role(s) in the resistance.

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It's late July now, and I've flown from Lesbos to Cyprus. I sit in a café on the island's southern shore. Alexi has asked if the table next to me is free, and soon we're comparing notes on the relative merits of working in coffee shops. He's younger than me, and says he went to Hong Kong for business but works in Cyprus now, so I'm curious to hear his experience of this country where I grew up. Instead, Alexi tells me he started a degree at the University of London, but he quit because of all the rainbows. 'You have to learn all their pronouns now, and if you don't agree with them they call you homophobic,' Alexi says, and manages to compare using neuter pronouns (Greek has had three genders for all the millennia on record) to identifying as a dog. 'There's a video from America,' he says, 'of someone on a leash identifying as a dog.' Things are better now, right, with Trump?

I've been sitting with an elbow resting on my closed laptop, and I shift to reveal my sticker—'dancing the queer utopia'—but Alexi doesn't notice. So I open the laptop and start typing, recording Alexi's assumption that I'll share his resentment at all the pronouns, and at being forced to think about other people's gender and sexuality, as if there were any way in hell I could get away from heterosexuality and the pressure to look

straight, be straight, and conform—after all, the very day I landed on this island, a man named Pambos sat next to me on the bus and, minutes into the ride, began pleading with me to return to Cyprus full-time and marry his friend, the forty-two-year-old teacher, because we're both educated and would have so much in common, and because, to Pambos, it was so obvious that what was missing from my life was a man.

I chose comfort over educating Alexi and Pambos, and maybe the same people who criticized Jodie Foster for coming out late, and in a way that deviated from the script, would criticize me for that. I think about the women who paddle alongside the Sappho Sirens as they swim toward their rock, and about the kayakers who offer protection to one group, but can't give all day, every day, to guarding all swimmers. They safeguard particular people at a particular time.

Around the time I came out to my mom just shy of forty, Jodie Foster had started making public references to her wife, and her wife had started posting photos of the pair together. Foster gave a print interview to *Net-a-Porter* in which she said 'I don't feel that I am a spokesperson for anything' (Bailey 2018). She supports others privately, as best she can. As she often does, Foster reminds readers that her greatest accomplishment is surviving—for child actors, survival is both difficult and unlikely. I think about how no star, no role model, no activist can be all things to all people. Our rainbows stand for all the many identities and gender expressions that we welcome, but also for the many things we want, the many ways we want, and the many ways we seek to satisfy one another. When the interviewer asks about Pride Month, the star offers a surprise. She talks about parades and 'the whole flag situation.' And with a smile that's intelligent, perhaps a little mischievous, and newly at ease, Jodie Foster says—for her—that 'Every day is gay pride.'

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