

**Introduction to
Confess the Gay Away?
Media, Religion, and the Political Economy of Ex-gay Therapy**

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Introduction: Confess Thy Self?

In the media debate surrounding the Christian ex-gay movement, the phrase “pray the gay away” is often used as shorthand to describe the movement’s religiously mediated sexual orientation conversion efforts. However, when one digs deeper, not just into ex-gay practices, but into the debate itself, it becomes clear that ex-gay change—regardless of whether effective or not—is less about prayer than confession and testimony. Consider writer-director Jamie Babbit’s film *But I’m a Cheerleader*, a campy, comedic tale of a lesbian cheerleader forced into an ex-gay conversion camp (featuring drag queen Ru Paul in a rare not-in-drag performance). The film, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 1999, is the second fictional pop culture text to depict the movement¹ and it is all about confession. It is an iconic depiction, an intervention in the debate that is frequently referenced and imitated. It is mentioned in a 2011 documentary called *This is What Love in Action Looks Like* about real-life teenager Zach Stark being forced into an ex-gay conversion program; it is imitated in both a 2007 episode of the popular Comedy Central animated satire *South Park*, in which the character Butters is forced into an ex-gay conversion program, and a 2013 episode of *Saturday Night Live* featuring Ben Affleck as an ex-gay counsellor. Well-researched by Babbit, the film revolves not around prayer but confession and identity politics, helping to demonstrate a primary finding of this study: today, from religion to psychology to popular culture, confessing one’s desires as one’s “true self” is pervasive, and the ex-gay debate exemplifies its pervasiveness.

But I’m a Cheerleader is about a teenager named Megan (Natasha Lyonne) who has the sinful label “lesbian” forced upon her by her Christian parents (Bud Cort and Mink Stole) and friends (Michelle Williams and Brandt Wille) even though she initially rejects the label.² Apparently in denial of her own true self, she is shipped off to a remote country program called

¹The first is a sketch that aired in 1995 on the HBO comedy series *Mr. Show* to be discussed in Chapter 4. Some earlier fictional pop culture texts reference psychiatric conversion therapy, but not as part of the ex-gay movement.

²She also has that identity forced upon her by the film, through fantasy point-of-view shots of cheerleader erotica.

True Directions. There she is expected to sacrifice her secret desires and replace them with a new identity. Indeed, upon arrival she is swiftly compelled to confess her sinful and diseased desires as step one of a five-step program to cure her, so she can testify (which is a form of confession—see below) to a new “ex-gay” self rooted in God and heterosexuality even though her new identity still references homosexuality. Written as a satirical comedy, *But I’m a Cheerleader* almost operates as a documentary. Even if one had never heard of the movement before seeing the film, one could leave it knowing as much about ex-gay change as were one to have read a magazine exposé specifically designed to tell all about the movement. While the film does not cover the movement’s history, it does expose its thought and practices, both religious and psychological, and now the movie is itself part of the history of the ex-gay debate.

The ex-gay movement is a loose organization of not-for-profit religious ministries and for-profit psychotherapy practices organized around the management and attempted elimination of what it considers sinful, abnormal and addictive same-sex desires and behaviours. In its attempt to sacrifice one identity in favour of another, the movement mixes Christian confession and prayer with confessional psychological methods that draw on now discredited psychiatric and psychological discourses from the mid twentieth century. It draws on biblical knowledge derived from conservative forms of Judeo-Christian thought, and psychoanalytic, behavioural, and addiction model theories that have since been supplanted in mainstream psychology and psychiatry by cognitive, evolutionary and neurobiological theories. Ever since the movement formed in 1973, following the psychiatric declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness, a variety of voices have participated in the debate: ex-gays, ex-gay survivors, conservative and liberal Christians, conservative and liberal psychologists and psychiatrists, and gay activists. However, mainstream media became a major player in the debate only after the movement introduced itself into the public sphere in 1998 through a marketing campaign designed to generate unpaid media coverage. Since then, news and entertainment producers have had a

significant impact on perceptions of the ex-gay “problem.” They choose what the public sees in mainstream communication channels; they provoke the most impassioned and angry responses in conservative Christian communities; they even predicted, via a 2007 episode of *Boston Legal*, that the movement would be sued for consumer fraud five years before it happened. *But I’m a Cheerleader* is one of the earliest and best pop culture interventions in the controversy. It is an ethical demonstration that skillfully accounts for, and mocks, the religious and psychological practices and strategies involved in the confessed sacrificial emergence of a new ex-gay self.

In the film, the founder and head of True Directions (Catherine Moriarty) signals the religious basis of her ministry when she says, “It’s a long path to righteousness, Megan, and it’s a battlefield of temptation out there,” but the program itself is described by counsellor Mike (Ru Paul Charles) as akin to Alcoholics Anonymous, thus signalling the addiction model component of ex-gay thought. That model is reinforced by the five steps the program (and film) is structured around. Step one is admitting (or confessing) that one is a homosexual and none of the other steps can be graduated to until step one is complete. Although Megan testifies to being Christian first—because she believes that being Christian, she cannot be lesbian—by the end of her second group therapy session, she tearfully admits to everyone that she is a homosexual. The remaining four steps are rediscovering one’s gender identity, family therapy, demystifying the opposite sex, and simulating a heterosexual lifestyle.³ Although not confessional in and of themselves, taken together, steps four and five are designed to *lead one* to a new confession, not a confession of sacrifice but a testimony of cure and a revelation of self-emergence in which one’s new ex-gay identity is celebrated. However, confession and testimony are *embedded* in steps two and three.

In step two one must testify to and perform one’s proper gender identity, which is where behavioural learning theory is depicted through the practice of ritually performing one’s proper

³ Simulating sex before marriage would be a sinful practice for real ex-gays; but the film uses it to represent the life-long struggle experienced by most in their change efforts, suggesting that ex-gays who move on to a heterosexual lifestyle underpinned by daily struggle and confession are only *simulating* that lifestyle rather than living it.

gender role through overtly feminine or masculine activities: vacuuming for girls and chopping wood for boys. In step three, confessions of complicity are elicited from one's parents so the psychoanalytic root cause of being gay can be isolated and sacrificed. A "Jewish boy (Joel Michaely) confesses his root cause as a "traumatic bris," blaming both his parents and tradition. Megan confesses hers as a period of mixed-up parental roles from toddlerhood. That has the Program Head invoke a now outdated conclusion about homosexuality from psychoanalyst Irving Bieber (1963; 1965), a researcher often referenced within ex-gay discourse. The Program Head says, "Your father was emasculated and your mother was domineering." Bieber writes that homosexuality is caused by "a detached, hostile father and a close binding, intimate, seductive mother who is a dominating, minimizing wife" (1965, 250). In the movie, as in real life, confessing one's family dynamic as an Oedipal problem to be solved is key to change. What is not depicted, and what is not part of the film's five step conversion process, is prayer.

As it happens, in 1999 the phrase "pray the gay away" had not yet entered popular discourse. In fact, *But I'm a Cheerleader* premiered only a year after the movement introduced itself to the public through its 1998 advertising campaign (to be analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2), but it was already in production before the ads appeared (Cynthia and Babbitt 2000). Thus its concern was not with the rhetoric of the debate, but the practices of the movement. Yet the film's release coinciding so closely with the movement's entry into public discourse highlights its importance as a popular culture depiction *in the debate*. By inserting itself into a controversy that was only just beginning, it heralded a proliferation of negative fictional depictions that last to this day and operate alongside and in tandem with numerous news and current affairs reports in print, broadcasting, and online. Indeed, as this study will show, the debate over ex-gay change operates almost as much through popular entertainment as it does through journalism, often blurring the distinction between the two. Both seek to influence the debate, to help govern it one might say, by presenting ex-gays "as objects of assessment and intervention" that solicit media consumers'

“participation in the cultivation of particular habits, ethics, behaviors, and skills” (quoting Ouellette and Hay’s 2008 analysis of Reality TV); albeit in this case, *contested* habits, ethics, behaviors, and skills, because whereas in journalism there has been an attempt to show both sides of the debate, in popular fiction ex-gay change is almost universally mocked.

The debate surrounding this movement is a commercialized debate, even when showcased at film festivals (which are advertised, sponsored by corporations, and supported through ticket sales), because it circulates through mass media. Gasher, Skinner, and Lorimer (2012) define mass media as “the vehicles through which mass communication takes place” and note that while it is usually understood as “newspapers, magazines, cinema, television, radio, and advertising; sometimes including book publishing... in the context of technological change... [mass media] now comprise the internet, websites, etc.” (14), and *all* “participate in the economy” (244).⁴ While the diversification of content across these media forms combined with audience fragmentation means that today it is seldom the case that any one media text will reach a mass audience, taken as a whole, the content of the ex-gay debate, which circulates through multiple forms of media to multiple different audiences, can be understood as a mass media phenomenon. This study, then, by tracing the debate across multiple channels of communication and forms of content, uses this broad definition and treats all ex-gay media as operating in a commercialized mass media environment. While social media will be addressed through specific examples, the primary focus of this study is on traditional news and entertainment, whether print, broadcast, or online. Yes, social media plays an important role in the controversy, but the ex-gay debate operates mostly through conventional media. Even and especially when politicized and used to support antigay legislation designed to repeal gay rights, or pro-gay legislation that bans conversion therapy for minors, the debate operates chiefly through news, film and broadcasting.

⁴ Much online social media is also commercialized. Consider targeted Gmail and Facebook ads, and ads embedded on YouTube. Also, as we will learn in Chapter 4, social media is often deployed by marketing firms as earned media

In that light, I argue in this dissertation that limiting the ex-gay debate to commercialized and politicized interventions in the public sphere (even well-researched interventions) obscures the real problem at the heart of the controversy: that the paradoxical use of confessions of self-sacrifice as technologies of self-emergence limits the self to a fundamentalist governmentality of unstable truth games, with the word “fundamentalist” understood in a broad sense. Indeed, the use of confessions of renunciation, true belief and self-emergence *outside* the movement *also* limits the self to a fundamentalist governmentality of unstable truth games. What is at stake here is the problem of what it means to testify the truth about oneself absolutely and unyieldingly by verbalizing one’s most secret, inner desires so as to purge them. Yet what is also at stake is the production of oneself as a new identity, one that can be testified to absolutely as a “true self”: I am ex-gay, I am straight, or I am an ex-gay survivor and I am gay. There is a double confessed pairing here, between confessions of one’s guilty desires and testimonies of fundamentally believed truth, and between confessions of self-sacrifice and confessions of self-emergence. One can see this double confessional pairing *within* the debate, but it is not addressed *by* the debate. The debate’s emphasis on prayer rather than confession is tactical. It operates strategically on both sides. For the movement, a focus on prayer offers hope for conservative Christians struggling with same-sex desire that God’s grace can change them, even though really what is offered is lifelong struggle and work. For those opposed to the movement, particularly those who do not identify as religious, a focus on prayer allows them to dismiss ex-gay change as magic so that they can claim the scientific position as theirs, even though they often misrepresent scientific data to make their point and even though the movement also claims science is on their side.

Sacrificial Confessions of Self-Emergence and the Christian Ex-gay Movement

The complicated nature of confession today, wherein confessions of desire and guilt and testimonies of truth and belief are paired with sacrificing the self so as to create the self anew

underlies the discourses and practices of all involved in ex-gay truth games, structuring even the commercial news and entertainment depicting the movement. Take for example a 2013 episode of a popular Oprah Winfrey Network documentary series, in which the President of the then most well-known ex-gay group, Exodus International, confessed his mistake in promoting ex-gay change, apologized on camera to a group of ex-gay survivors, and then shut Exodus down a day before the show was scheduled to air. “Special Report: God and Gays,” episode 9 of season 4 of *Our America*, was both prime time Reality TV entertainment and a direct and devastating documentary intervention in the ex-gay debate. In it the commercial producers of the show deployed an ex-gay confession against itself and all but confessed their own guilt in not previously condemning the movement enough. The episode follows two earlier ex-gay episodes of *Our America* from 2011 and 2012, both of which also showcased Alan Chambers. However, those episodes showcased Chambers as an ex-gay spokesperson, wherein he confessed his same-sex desire as a problem that could be solved, testified that he had changed (albeit with struggle) and declared his emergent ex-gay identity a success story that others could emulate. In the 2013 episode, however, Chambers’ confession is an atonement, an admission of the movement’s guilt, and a complete disavowal of the cause he spent almost a decade promoting. But it was also atonement for the show itself. Although the earlier episodes (both of which showcased the slogan “Pray Away the Gay” in their titles) presented the debate in a relatively balanced fashion, giving voice to various perspectives, they evoked a vitriolic response from gay rights advocates who disapprove of any ex-gay depiction that does not outright condemn ex-gay change as false and harmful (Besen 2011a; John 2011; Ward 2011). “God and Gays” was an apologetic response to those critics. It was also what Anna McCarthy (2007) calls “a neoliberal theater of suffering.”

It begins by summarizing the earlier episodes and then introduces the ex-gay survivors gathering to hear Chambers’ apology. In the episode itself, the survivors allow their stories to be told cinematically, their interviews intercut with footage of them preparing to meet Chambers;

however, several of their full interviews are available uncut on the show's website. There they testify about their long struggle to reconcile their homosexuality with their faith, noting how much they prayed for change and hoped for help from Exodus; but each also confesses failure, feelings of shame, anger, and betrayal, admissions that overshadow their prayers (OWN 2013b). Eventually everyone gathers in a Lutheran church basement and forms a meeting circle, as if for group therapy, but a cut to Chambers has him read his apology instead. It is an edited two and a half minute apology in which he asks for forgiveness by comparing his promotion of Exodus to having accidentally caused a car crash. The footage on the website reveals his full confession to have been nearly eight minutes long (OWN 2013a). That apology is more detailed, and in it Chambers says how sorry he is for the trauma he caused, acknowledges the confessions and testimonies of the many people he harmed, and atones for the "stories of shame, sexual misconduct, and false hope" he heard but did not hear well enough. Thus he confesses his failure in not properly acknowledging the pain of other ex-gays, and for not sharing and acknowledging his own continuing struggles with same-sex desire. He even accepts and utilizes the language of so many of his opponents, who (as we will learn) accuse ex-gay leaders of consumer fraud: he admits that were he to continue promoting change, it would be "truly fraudulent." He ends his apology with a series of six or seven sentences that all begin with the words "I'm sorry."

McCarthy uses the phrase "neoliberal theater of suffering" in reference to Reality TV programs that put the suffering of needy participants on display as correctable by entrepreneurial experts, both to produce profit for producers and to encourage audiences to accept such advice for themselves without state help (see Chapter 4). "God and Gays" operates in much the same way, except here the experts are failed ex-gay "entrepreneurs" who confess their failures so that the audience will not make the same mistake. However, over and above the fact that the ex-gay entrepreneur Alan Chambers did indeed close the enterprise called Exodus following filming, the most striking component of this episode (especially of the website footage) is how much it is

structured by confessions and testimonies of trauma and sexual shame, wherein an older desperate desire to change is replaced by the guilt and anger that change did not happen. Prayer is referenced in the raw footage, by Chambers himself, as well as by the ex-gay survivors who testify to what led them into the movement; but those references are not included in the episode. Indeed, this is an episode about confessing sex, not praying it away. It is also about a confession of guilt and a testimony of change, but not the kind offered by the movement. And it is about the confessions of ex-gay survivors. Much like how ex-gays are expected to confess their past as a problem to be solved and testify that their same-sex desire must change, in “God and Gays” ex-gay survivors confess their past in the ex-gay movement as a problem to be solved, testify to the harm they suffered, and confess their same-sex desire as that which they cannot change.

As should be clear by now, ex-gay confession and testimony are intimately connected. Indeed, testimony is a form of confession. In one of the best accounts of the ex-gay movement, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-gay Movement* (2006), Tanya Erzen devotes an entire chapter to that relationship (160-182). She writes that ex-gay “testimony blurs the distinction between the public and private, religious and therapeutic, making sexuality and sexual addiction part of a public discourse of confession and public intimacy” (161). She describes how testimony is the basis of an ex-gay system of confession where one is expected to account for one’s struggles with pornography, masturbation, and sexual falls, writing that “nothing is too private or painful to share” (174). She even shoves the two words together into a near hyphenated descriptor, declaring ex-gay confessions “testimonial confessions” (176). As part of her analysis she references Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1990a [1976]⁵), noting his claim that the West has become a confessing society. She highlights in particular his analysis of confession as a power relation and describes how in the ex-gay movement confession

⁵ Dates in square brackets following a reference indicate the original publication date. In the case of Foucault, for books, articles and interviews, they indicate the original French publication date; for published lectures, the date the lecture was delivered. However, original dates will only be indicated the first time a source is cited in each chapter.

is used to tie ex-gay participants to the primacy of scripture and to encourage obedience to the people running the movement. She even describes the particular ex-gay ministry she studied, New Hope Ministry, as being “part of a wider public culture of intimacy in which ex-gay confessions of traumatized identity become part of a public testimonial discourse of conversion” (179).

Erzen’s analysis is sound and this study will confirm much of what she says, especially as it relates to Foucault. However, she only draws on one of Foucault’s works and thus misses how his scholarship can help frame ex-gay confession more systematically. For example, she both interchanges and juxtaposes confession and testimony and then concludes that by “blurring the distinction between [the two], the ex-gay movement transforms therapy, traditionally a private transaction between a patient and therapist, into a public process” (181). Except it is not the movement that blurs the distinction and makes private therapy public; it is the culture of confession itself. Because in confession’s long and complicated genealogy, it and testimony have always been blurred, and together they became part of a popular therapeutic culture before the ex-gay movement emerged (Foucault 1990a; Shorter 1997). Another analysis of ex-gay struggle by Michelle Wolkomir (2006) operates similarly. She examines two church based therapy groups, one ex-gay and one ex-ex-gay, and uses confessions and testimonies from each to conclude that both privilege heterosexuality as an ideal. While not wrong, she fails to recognize and consider the broader confessional culture within which their participation occurs.⁶

While acknowledging and utilizing the important contributions that both Erzen and Wolkomir offer to understanding the ex-gay phenomenon, this study goes beyond their work in

⁶ Dawne Moon (2005) also analyzes ex-gay discourse as testimonial rather than prayer driven, arguing that both it and pro-gay discourse operate to foreclose ways of being that do not fit a gay/straight dichotomy. She even uses Foucault to make her case; however, she only references his conception of discourse as power, failing to recognize the importance of his research into confession and his historical linking of confession with testimony and ethical technologies of the self. In addition, Bernadette Barton (2012) includes a chapter on the ex-gay movement in her ethnographic description of Christian homophobia in the America Bible Belt, but the movement is not the primary focus of her study. Also she does not analyze the role of confession or testimony in the movement, and she only references Foucault in relation to conservative Christian surveillance practices.

two ways. First, it does not limit itself to only a few specific ethnographic cases but addresses instead the entire media debate surrounding ex-gay change, drawing upon and analyzing multiple case studies. Second, by focusing on the primary role confession plays in both the movement and the debate, and by situating confession within a much larger theoretical analytic, this study will account for the ex-gay movement as being part of a much larger and more complicated history of the practice. There are a number of different forms of confession at play in the ex-gay debate, some of which have already been highlighted. In both *But I'm a Cheerleader* and *Our America* we can see confessions of one's secrets, sins, and guilt, as well as testimonial confessions of one's own truth, all of which involve sex and desire. But in this study we will also encounter confessions of faith, doctrine and dogma that harken back to Christian confessions of creed.⁷

Had Erzen engaged with more of Foucault's work, she would have encountered another understanding of confession that is central to his larger analysis, and she would have recognized its placement within a longer history. In the early 1970s Foucault analyzed confessions of legal and criminal guilt, voluntary and coerced, in both *Discipline & Punish* (1995 [1975]) and the memoirs of the nineteenth century murderer Pierre Rivière (1975 [1973]). But Foucault was just as concerned with Rivière's "madness" as with his criminality, having studied historically changing discourses of mental illness years earlier in *History of Madness* (2009 [1961]). Thus it was not a huge leap to trace criminal confessions to psychiatric confessions (2006 [1973/74]), to psychological confessions of sexual desire (1990a; 2003a [1974/75]), then to ancient Christian confessions of self-sacrifice (1997a [1981]; 2007a [1980]; 2014 [1979/80]). Foucault's analysis of Christian confession, in which "the revelation of the truth about oneself [could not] be dissociated from the obligation to renounce oneself" (2007a, 187), led him to contrast "the

⁷ There are many churches that confess a denominational creed, but there are also "non-confessional" churches that do not. While technically correct, describing churches that do not confess specific creeds as "non-confessional" uses confession in a specified sense and ignores a strong link between confessing an established creed and confessing a set of basic fundamental doctrines as believed truth (Campbell 1996; Phillips & Okholm 1996). Just because a church does not confess a creed does not mean it does not testify to its own truths, beliefs, doctrines or dogma, however personalized; nor does it mean members do not confess their sins and secrets to God and each other.

obligation to hold as truth a set of propositions that constitute dogma..., to hold certain books as a permanent source of truth..., to accept the decisions of certain authorities in matters of truth... [with] the duty to explore who he [sic] is, what is happening within himself, the faults he may have committed, the temptations to which he is exposed” (1997a, 178). Thus he distinguishes between testimonies of faith rooted in dogma and confessions of the self rooted in desire; however, he also clearly and unequivocally links them together: “A Christian needs the light of faith when he [sic] wants to explore himself. Conversely, his access to the truth can’t be conceived of without the purification of his soul” (ibid). In other words, as early as the fourth century, a Christian could not testify without confession nor confess without testifying. Today in the ex-gay movement it is still the case that one cannot confess Christian truth without also testifying that one’s guilty desires need to be purged; *and vice versa*.

Foucault also demonstrates that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we came to be governed by confession in a different way: “one of the great problems of Western culture [in the last two centuries] has been to find the possibility of founding the hermeneutics of the self not, as it was in... early Christianity, on the sacrifice of the self but... on a positive, on the theoretical and practical, emergence of the self” (2007a, 189, addition in brackets from the source). When Christian confession was transmitted first into psychiatry and psychology, and then into civil society via the discourse of sex and the marketing of psychoanalysis as private practice (Shorter 1997), it was transformed and became the positive basis of the self rather than the negative (Foucault 1990a; 2003a).⁸ The result was the invention not of identity, but of identity politics, wherein confession became a technology of self-formation in resistance to the psychiatric label “homosexual” but in acceptance of the political and subjective label “gay.” That has led many to adopt LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) identities as their true selves.

⁸ Judith Butler’s claim that in the 1980s Foucault reversed his 1970s critique of confession “as a forcible extraction of sexual truth” to a manifestation “of the self that does not have to correspond to some putative inner truth” is not accurate (2005, 112). His genealogy of confession in multiple publications describes how it changed across history.

Indeed, from psychoanalysis to humanistic psychology to the cognitive revolution, there is a decades long history of discovering oneself through guided, targeted confessions of one's behaviour and past.⁹ The ex-gay movement (in spite of its mere tentative acceptance of cognitive psychology and its rejection of secular humanism) sits at the culmination of that transformation, as does the ex-gay debate; but within both, the practice of confession as self-sacrifice still lives.

In *But I'm a Cheerleader*, when Megan tearfully confesses that she is a homosexual and willingly attempts ex-gay change, she participates in a confession of self-sacrifice that has her testify to the truth of her desire precisely so it can be purged. But by testifying an ex-gay identity (however briefly), she also participates in confession as self-emergence. Likewise, in *Our America*, when ex-gay survivors confess themselves as gay and testify that they cannot change, they sacrifice and confess away their former ex-gay identities so as to ground their emergent selves in their same-sex desire. Of course, confession as self-sacrifice may appear to coincide just with confessions of sin, guilt, and one's sexual secrets, and confession as self-emergence could appear to only coincide with confessions of faith and truth (for to confess one's faith is partly to confess one's self as emergent within one's faith tradition.) But it is more complicated than that. Foucault's research shows us that in the Christian monasteries of the fourth century, confessions of faith and truth were intimately tied to obligations of obedience, "a trembling obedience, in which the Christian will have to fear God and recognize the necessity of submitting to His will, and to the will of those who represent Him" (2011 [1983/84], 333). In that context, confessing one's faith involved sacrificing oneself to the will of God, the Church, and the priest, and Erzen and Wolkomir demonstrate that such a dynamic is still at play today in the movement, where public confessions of faith and sin are authoritatively demanded for change and salvation, even in so-called "non-confessional" churches (cf. fn. 7). On the other hand, when gay rights

⁹ Cognitive-behavioural questionnaires designed to identify and isolate positive and negative thought and behaviour patterns so they can be reinforced or eliminated are an example of confessional sacrifice and emergence operating together. In other words, psychology today still operates within a larger context that has not yet escaped confession.

activist Wayne Besen appears on television to denounce the movement and proclaim that gay people should identify as who they really are, even writing in his anti-ex-gay book (2003), “the ex-gay actor must take off the costume and rediscover his or her *true self*” (33-4, my italics), he establishes one’s desires as one’s true identity. Thus to “come out of the closet” and confess oneself as LGBTQ is to confess one’s desires *as* self-emergence. The doubling of confessions of desire with confessions of truth and faith, and confessions of self-sacrifice with confessions of self-emergence, creates a quadrature wherein each confessional form is linked to the other.

For that reason I use the word confession in this study broadly, not just in reference to sin, but also identity, not just in reference to secret desires, but also professed beliefs, not just in reference to sacrificing guilt, but also proclaiming truth, and not just in reference to the Catholic church, or even Christianity in general, but also psychiatry and psychology, and yes, popular culture as well. While it is true, Foucault’s research into confession, both ancient and modern, draws on mostly European sources, and the ex-gay movement operates primarily as a North American phenomenon, as a primarily *Christian* North American phenomenon rooted also in psychoanalysis (a form of thought born in modern Europe), the ex-gay debate is part of a history of thought that reaches across the ocean and as far back as medieval Europe. Furthermore, the ex-gay debate is not limited to North America. It operates across the English speaking world as well as in Europe, Africa and Asia. There is a reason Exodus was called Exodus *International*.¹⁰ Thus confession is a complicated practice with a long genealogy and many components; however, while some aspects of early Christian confession are still at play today, they have been modified by confession’s long history, and they continue to be modified today, for confession now operates on a much larger scale, proliferating even through popular culture as an

¹⁰ Prior to its disbandment, Exodus, which also had ministries in South America, Asia, and Africa, linked to 240 separate local ministries in North America alone (Barton 2012, 118).

increasingly politicized and commodified technology of knowledge, power, and the self that operates as part of “a declarative modality of truth” (phrase taken from Brown 2006, 707).

Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and “True Believing” Fundamentalism

Although born in the 1970s, the ex-gay movement did not become part of a public debate until 1998 when it joined with several Christian Right lobby groups to promote and advertise “freedom from homosexuality” as a marketable product.¹¹ While most ex-gay psychotherapy practices charge fees, many churches offer their services for free (see Chapter 2); but by joining lobbyists to market ex-gay change as a service and product, the movement showcased itself as selling something with an economic cost and blurred the distinction between its for-profit counselling and charitable ministries. It commercialized itself and opened itself up to accusations of consumer fraud. Even *But I’m a Cheerleader* picked up on this: the parents in the film complain about how much money they are paying for their children’s cure and insist that it better work. By marketing ex-change in paid ads and submitting itself to cost-benefit analyses, the movement could not help but subject itself to a form of commodification, here defined as assigning exchange value to an item or practice previously understood in terms of its non-economic use value. The movement thus also participated in the continued commodification of confession, a process that began as far back as the early twentieth century when psychoanalysis migrated from mental hospitals into private practice (Foucault 1990a; Shorter 1997). That does not mean all confessions or the ex-gay movement have been entirely commodified, or that there is no resistance to commercialization, especially within Christian communities. But ex-gay ads situate the movement and the debate surrounding it within an economic system that increasingly

¹¹ The movement did receive some mainstream media coverage in the 1990s prior to the ad campaign and it was also the topic of a 1993 feature documentary made by gay rights activists (*One Nation Under God*). Even as far back as the 1980s it was occasionally showcased on daytime talk shows like *Donahue*. But that early coverage was fleeting. The movement did not become part of a *major* public debate until after the 1998 ad campaign (see Chapter 4).

extends the rationality of the market to non-economic domains. By selling itself with funding from Christian lobby groups, the movement also allowed its commodification to be politicized.

A 2007 episode of *Boston Legal* called “Selling Sickness” preceded by five years a real ex-gay consumer fraud lawsuit still on trial in New Jersey (see Chapter 2). The episode draws links between the commodification of ex-gay change and the role it plays in American politics. Although primarily addressing the economics and legality of selling a cure that does not work, this popular culture intervention in the ex-gay debate is also permeated by confession. It begins with a judge (Henry Gibson) confessing to lawyer Denny Crane (William Shatner) that he suffers from SSAD (Same-Sex Attraction Disorder), paid \$40,000 for a failed cure, and now wants to sue. Crane solicits help from partner Alan Shore (James Spader) because, he confesses, the case makes him uncomfortable. That has Shore confess to the presiding judge that he hopes the fact they once slept together will not negatively affect the case. At trial the ex-gay ministry being sued calls numerous witnesses to the stand to confess their past same-sex desire and testify to being cured.¹² Dismissing their testimonies as self-deluded false confessions, Shore wins the case by arguing that homosexuality is not a disease and cannot be cured because “Big Pharma” has not invented a pill to do so. In fact, he says, the real purpose of selling a gay cure is about “filling the pockets of Congress” so they can ban gay marriage. In other words, not only does the episode address the commodification of ex-gay change, it also addresses the role the ex-gay movement plays in the culture wars, where battles between social liberals and social conservatives are embedded in a complex political economy that sees two very different philosophies operate together in a very conflicted union: neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

In the past 40 years, neoliberalism and neoconservatism have worked together to alter the political economic landscape of most of the Western world. David Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as a set of theories and practices that propose “human well-being can best be

¹²In another case in the episode, we hear the confession of a girl (Hallee Hirsh) who was molested by her Rabbi.

advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Raewyn Connell (2010) calls it “a missionary faith” of deregulation and commodification (23). Ouellette and Hay (2008) and McCarthy (2007) analyze television programming that encourages viewers to govern themselves based on the advice of entrepreneurial experts as part of the neoliberalization of mass media. Neoliberal practices are permeated by cost-benefit analyses, risk management discourses, and the rhetoric of individual choice. Neoconservatism, on the other hand, encourages virtue, patriotism, corporate economics and the destruction of the welfare state (High 2009). Explicitly capitalist, neoconservatism is distinct from neoliberalism by being “centered on fixing and enforcing [moralized] meanings, conserving certain ways of life, and repressing and regulating desire” (Brown 2006, 692). As systematized forms of thought (or “rationalities”), the two are opposed to each other and yet connected. Indeed, corporate expansion and the reduction of welfare dependency are directly amenable to neoliberal policies. At the same time, however, “the neoliberal rationality of strict means-ends calculations and need satisfaction... clashes with the neoconservative project of producing a moral subject and moral order against the effects of the market in culture” (Brown, 699). Although it would be a mistake to conflate neoconservatism (which is not explicitly religious and is sometimes preoccupied with foreign policy) and conservative Christianity, there are strong connections between them (see Chapter 3), and because of that the ex-gay movement as a case study highlights clear tensions between the neoliberal and neoconservative forms of thought and practice it utilizes.

It would also be a mistake to conflate the Christian Right and the Christian groups that support the ex-gay movement. Erzen defines the Christian Right as a “coalition of *politically active* fundamentalist and evangelical conservative Christians” (252 n. 2, my italics), but the ex-gay movement is supported by many Christian churches that are not fundamentalist, evangelical or politically active, as well as by some Jewish groups and psychologists. Unfortunately, in the

media debate, where the labels “fundamentalist,” “evangelical” and “conservative Christian” are used interchangeably, such distinctions disappear.¹³ The movement itself blurs these distinctions. Before Exodus closed, it was an inter-denominational organization that linked many churches together; not just fundamentalist and evangelical, but several that profess homosexuality to be a sin (Besen 2003; Drescher and Zucker 2006; Jones and Yarhouse 2007). The organization that replaced it, the Restored Hope Network (RHN) is also inter-denominational (RHN 2012). As umbrella organizations, these ministries did and do minimize religious differences so as to focus on the common goal of eliminating unwanted same-sex desire. This extends to conservative Catholic groups and groups many fundamentalists and evangelicals would not even consider Christian, such as Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), and it extends to Judaism through the group JONAH (Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing), as well as into psychology and psychiatry through the group NARTH (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality).¹⁴ However, JONAH appeared only after the 1998 ad campaign, and a former member turned critic of NARTH, Dr. Warren Throckmorton, has exposed that organization as being comprised of mostly religious lay people, not secular scientists (2011a). Because of how the media and the movement obscure the differences between these groups, I will address the movement generally as a conservative Christian organization (it is primarily Christian), referring to specific denominations as required, sometimes using the longer descriptor

¹³ Consider three articles on the movement from *The New York Times* published within a year of each other. An Erik Eckholm (2012) article describes the movement as being comprised of “conservative Christian groups,” whereas a Mimi Swartz (2011) article only discusses evangelical Christianity, noting “how desperately evangelicals do not want to be gay.” A third by Benoit Denizet-Lewis (2011) describes former gay rights activist turned ex-gay advocate Michael Glatze as a “fundamentalist Christian who writes derogatorily about being gay” without referencing any other kind of Christian. As it happens, in several articles on the 2015 Gus Van Sant produced biopic of Michael Glatze (which is based on the Denizet-Lewis article) Glatze is described as a “fundamentalist Christian” in one review (Debruge 2015), a “conservative Christian minister” in another article (Ring 2014), an “evangelical Christian pastor” in another (Rolling Stone 2015), and in one more as having merely “embraced Christianity” (Fear and Reilly 2015). Even Christian writers sometimes blur these distinctions. In a *Christian Post* article on the movement, “conservative Christian” and “evangelical” are used interchangeably and the author uncritically quotes a poll that lumps “born-again, evangelical [and] fundamentalist Christians” into one category (Menzie 2014).

¹⁴In 2014 NARTH folded itself into a new organization: the Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity.

“fundamentalist, evangelical, conservative Catholic and Mormon” to remind the reader of the broader religious coalition at play. Of those labels, however, there is one I will use more broadly.

When not in reference to specific Christian groups, I will use the words “fundamentalist” and “fundamentalism” to mean an unquestioned literal belief in fundamental principles that is imposed on others regardless of evidence, something that is pervasive in both ex-gay *and* pro-gay thought, religious and secular alike. Indeed, one of my primary arguments is that numerous participants in the ex-gay debate, both pro and anti, are “true believers” who engage in a form of testimonial fundamentalism. When I make that claim, I extract the word out of its Christian context to refer to a larger phenomenon (see Chapter 1). Also, when I use the descriptor “true belief,” I am not isolating any particular belief system or mean to suggest that such beliefs are necessarily “true.” I use the descriptor as it is deployed in the discourse itself. When Jim Burroway (2008) states in a YouTube video that ex-gay leaders would offer their services for free if they could because they are “true believers,” or when Lori Yearwood (1998) describes one of the architects of the ex-gay ad campaign as a “true believer,” they do not refer to any particular denominational belief, nor do they mean to enter any debates over the semantic meaning of the word “believe”; they mean that ex-gay leaders believe absolutely that they are right, that they confess their truth, regardless of arguments or evidence to the contrary. In that light, the descriptor “true believer” can also be applied to many opposed to the movement. The ex-gay debate is a “truth game,” in a Foucauldian sense, wherein different forms of conflicted and conflicting truth, which are truly believed by those professing them (or are performed as truly believed) are deployed against each other as technologies of knowledge, power and the self to govern the self and others through declarations of that which is affirmed as fundamental truth.

I do not mean to juxtapose true belief with rational thought either, although I do mean to juxtapose it with Habermas’ notion of rational deliberation (see Chapter 4). Many Christians truly believe the Bible condemns homosexuality; and many gay rights activists truly believe that

one's sexual orientation cannot be changed because it is biological—both are true believers who ground their beliefs in a particular rationality, even if they are often unprepared and unwilling to debate each other reasonably. That is to say, if one accepts the Bible as literally and inerrantly true in its apparent condemnation of homosexuality, then it logically follows and is thus rational to believe that homosexuality is a sin. Similarly, if one uncritically accepts *some* contemporary biological research into the nature of homosexuality while uncritically rejecting other studies as wrong, then it logically follows that homosexuality is biological and cannot be cured. In both examples, conclusions are rationally determined based on truly believed premises and are then deployed systematically in the debate to govern what others should believe and how others should behave in relation to homosexuality; they are, in fact, deployed as *governmental* rationalities (see below). What is not happening here is reasoned deliberation wherein both sides listen to and acknowledge the other's argument so as to collaboratively discover a common truth. In fact, in spite of the true beliefs of so many in this debate, exaggerated claims and simplified narratives that misrepresent key issues, especially as related to the science of sexuality, are not just part of the discourse of the movement, they are part of the pro-gay discourses operating against the movement (see Chapters 1, 2, and 4). But that does not undermine the role of truth in the debate. Lorna Weir (2008) differentiates between veridical, governmental, symbolic and mundane forms of truth. That is to say, there are verifiable empirical forms of truth, strategic and regulatory forms of truth, illustrative and ideological forms of truth, and everyday common sense forms of truth. The ex-gay debate oscillates between the first three, often mixing them together with little discernment, wherein, as noted above, scientific studies of ex-gay change are deployed ideologically to govern thought and behaviour. Thus when I refer to certain beliefs, ideologies, or modes of governance as being “rationalities” I mean them as systematic modes of thought and not in reference to any opposition between that which is rational and that which is not.

When I began this study I conceived of the ex-gay movement as a contradictory union of two irreconcilable forms of thought: religious literalism and psychological empiricism. But I discovered that the religious and psychological rationalities at play in ex-gay thought are not necessarily contradictory and that, in fact, psychology and psychiatry are historically founded on, and in some cases emerged out of Christian thought. Although the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology have always been adamant in their claims of scientific empiricism, they both have histories that cannot easily be disentangled from religion (Foucault 1990a; 2003a; Szasz 1960; 1970). Indeed, since before its decline as the dominant form of psychiatry, some considered the “science” of psychoanalysis to be a “temple devoted to the last remaining dinosaur ideology of the nineteenth century” (Shorter 1997, 170) or worse, a form of “faith-healing” (ibid, 312). In fact, since at least the 1990s, there has been general agreement within the disciplines of the psyche—as they finally admitted what Thomas Szasz (1960; 1965; 1970) had been accusing them of for decades—that their own twentieth century understanding of homosexuality as an illness was “little more than a scientific transformation of the ancient Judeo-Christian prejudice” (Konner 1995; see also Bootzin, Acocella and Alloy 1993; Corsini 1994; and Kazdin 2000), a matter that I have written about elsewhere (Thorn 2014). In other words, I discovered that psychological thought is not nearly as “scientific” as it claims to be, but that does not mean it is not a form of rationality. However, this is not an analysis of that which is scientific and that which is not, or that which is religious and that which is not; this is an analysis of how different forms of theological, psychological and political rationality are deployed strategically through media as forms of ethical governance in an increasingly neoliberalized political economy.

Both the Christian Right and the ex-gay movement seek to legislate morality and produce a moral subject within an explicitly condoned capitalist system even as the perceived *laissez-faire* nature of that system is resisted. As we will learn in Chapters 2 and 3, the movement’s rhetoric of choice, in which the freedom to change is situated within a sexual marketplace, does

not always sit well with Christian discourses of virtue and moralism; and yet they still operate together. In this combined discourse, the ex-gay participant is situated as an entrepreneur of the self, working to change the self through daily confessional struggle precisely to conform to a moral order that does not accept same-sex desire. However, that only reveals the ex-gay subject as a political contradiction that is insufficiently entrepreneurial for the discourse it employs, because how can a subject that submits itself to doctrine and authority to sacrifice him or herself to God's gendered will be a self-produced heterosexual enterprise in a free market of sexual choice? Thus neoliberalism and neoconservative are not always allies of the movement.

The discourse of consumer fraud, which emphasizes individual economic rights and operates through isolated court cases rather than collective government action, is agreeable with neoliberal discourse; it is also one of the most powerful weapons deployed against the movement by those promoting confession of the gay or lesbian self as one's true self. While the first ex-gay consumer fraud court case was not filed until 2012, in 2007 *Boston Legal* participated in a *rhetoric* that was already in play (see Chapter 2). But *Boston Legal* also notes neoconservative attempts by the Christian Right to use ex-gay change to limit the protection of gay rights through government intervention. In response to such attempts, those opposed to the movement have deployed similar measures. Anti-ex-gay legislation that bans conversion therapy for minors has passed in California, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia, and similar legislation is being proposed in Canada (see Chapter 3). This kind of intervention, justified to protect children from ex-gay harm, sees those opposed to ex-gay change promoting a certain kind of family morality. Additionally, privately funded media organizations, as well as some that are publically funded (i.e. the CBC in Canada and NPR in the United States), intervene through the deployment of "earned media," or "free" coverage generated by an event, and most of that has turned against the movement. Thus the commodification of ex-gay confession is problematized both within the movement by a moralism that resists the buying and selling of sex and seeks to regulate it, and

outside the movement by counter-measures and media coverage that are themselves rooted in neoliberal and neoconservative forms of thought. In other words, contract law, family values regulation, and commodified representation have all been turned against the movement.

The questions I tackle in this study are these: What does it mean to confess truth today? How can ancient confessions of sacrifice and obedience be combined with modern testimonies striving for self-knowledge and identity formation? How do such apparently contradictory forms of confession circulate within a political economy of neoliberal choice and neoconservative morality? I will show that unstable ex-gay truth games do not *masquerade* as true beliefs—they are truly believed—but their status as fundamentalist declarations of confessed truth undermines their veracity in the controversy, on both sides of the debate. Yes, the movement’s marketing of consumer choice combined with legislative interventions aimed at protecting religious rights while denying gay rights have been turned against it in the form of a fraud lawsuit and legislation banning conversion therapy for minors; and also the ex-gay subject has been revealed as a contradiction that is not “entrepreneurial” enough for the discourse it employs. Yet because the movement is rooted in the faith of true believers who reject arguments against change as being biased by politically motivated ideology, and because they have their own parallel system of Christian popular culture in which to circulate their truth claims, the movement has legitimized itself in its own communities in spite of its contradictory regimes of truth. And because the pro-gay discourses used against the movement, however successful in appearance, are founded in the same truth games, the primary confessional practices constituting the movement remain intact.

Describing an Analytic Approach and Method: A Governmental Discourse Analysis

My approach to this debate combines discourse analysis with tools derived from critical political economy but deployed through a Foucauldian grid of inquiry. It is a “governmental” approach whereby discursive statements, practices, and representations operating in a specific

political economic context are analyzed as events that seek to govern thought and behaviour in a broad sense: to influence, persuade, convince, and encourage people to change their thought and conduct through ethical self-governance *as well as* through discipline, dominance and control. Governmentality is seldom all controlling and never monolithic. Yes, within the movement, pro-ex-gay psychologists, psychiatrists, ministers, and religious leaders exercise dominance and control over participants, often imposing strict rules, managing roles and practices, and obliging confessions of secret desires and behaviours in religious and therapeutic settings; but ex-gay subjects “usually” participate by choice, voluntarily submitting themselves to this management,¹⁵ which they perceive as a supportive pastoral relationship. Furthermore, the movement’s governmentality is resisted and modified by the governmentalities of those opposed, including the gay rights movement, gay-positive psychiatry and psychology, pro-gay Christianity, and now commercial popular culture. This approach understands ex-gay governmentality to be wide-ranging, complex, and extremely conflicted—not merely the internal rhetoric of the movement *or* its rhetoric in the public sphere, but also its representation and depiction by others.

Foucault first developed governmentality as a political-economic concept, defining it in relation to classical political economy, the administrative state that emerged in Europe following the Middle Ages, and the modern managing of populations (1991 [1980]; 2007b [1977/78]). He analyzed, “the development of a technology of government based on the principle that it is already in itself ‘too much,’ ‘excessive’... whose necessity and usefulness can and must always be questioned” (2008 [1978/79], 319). He traced it back to the medieval Christian pastoral and then followed it forward through modern liberalism into twentieth century neoliberal theory (2007b; 2008). But he later expanded his definition to include guidance, influence and self-government, analyzing technologies of the self in particular: “Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word... is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts

¹⁵ Except when minors are forced into ex-gay therapy by their parents or guardians (see Chapters 3 and 4).

between techniques which impose coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by [the-]self” (2007c [1980], 154). In other words, the government of self and others is political, economic *and* subjective, it involves knowledge, power, *and* ethics, and it operates across historical periods (1983a [1982]; 1983b; 2000a [1977]; 2010 [1982/83]).¹⁶

I engage with Foucault holistically, considering all of his published books, transcribed lectures, and multiple interviews as being in dialogue, each a component of a larger project. In fact, in the early 1980s, Foucault himself re-described his entire life’s work in terms of analyzing three general axes of experience: knowledge, normativity, and the self (1984b). Yes, there are some who only engage with Foucault through one or two works, operating as if he analyzes only singular, historical phenomena that are not always relevant for today. But his analyses are meant to elucidate who we have become in the present. Consider what he writes at the beginning of *The History of Sexuality Vol 2* (1990b [1984]): “in order to understand how the modern individual could experience himself as a subject of a ‘sexuality,’ it was essential first to determine how, for centuries, Western man [sic] had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire” (5-6). The point of tracing the desiring subject back to ancient Greece was to understand who we are now, and the point of tracing governmentality back to the Christian pastoral and forward again into German, French, and American neoliberalism was also to understand ourselves today.

¹⁶ Some scholars highlight governmentality as key to understanding the links between Foucault’s different methods and periods (Bevir 2010; Dean 1994; Lemke 2011). His work on psychology, medicine, punishment, economics, sexuality, and spirituality has been categorized into three periods: a) his knowledge period, characterized by an archaeological method that uncovers epistemological similarities, dispersions, and changes between historical periods and accounts for discourse in terms of conditions of existence; b) his power period, characterized by a genealogical method analyzing apparatuses of power and changing tactics and strategies of control that accounts for discourse and practices in terms of conditions of emergence; and c) his ethics and subjectivity period, characterized by an expanded genealogical method emphasizing problematizations, “regimes of truth,” subjective self-constitution, and the contingent relationships between knowledge, power, and ethics (Dean 1994; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983; Lemke 2011). However, some argue it is a mistake to see such clear breaks between his methods and periods (Bevir 2010; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983; Lemke 2011). Indeed, Foucault characterizes archaeology as an aspect of genealogy (1984a; 2003b [1975/76]; 2007c; see also Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983) and in his final publications and lectures he analyzes knowledge, power, and ethics together (1988 [1984]; 1990b; 2011).

It is through both governmentality's broadness *and* its specificity that we can recognize confession as a primary form of governmentality. Confession exemplifies the government of self and others. It is rooted in religious, psychological, legal, and even economic knowledges, and it is a technology of power used by experts (ministers, priests, psychiatrists, psychologists, the police, judges, marketers, advertisers, etc.) to regulate, control, influence, and govern others. It also operates as a technology of the self, as a practice of self-regulation, self-purification, self-knowledge, self-control, self-liberation, and yes, self-governance. There should be no surprise, then, that confession sits at the heart of all the differing camps in the ex-gay debate: conservative Christianity confesses desire to purge it; progressive Christianity confesses desire to reconcile it; psychology and psychiatry confesses desire to cure it or reconcile it (depending on the desire's perceived deviancy or normalcy); the gay rights movement confesses desire to celebrate it and convert it into one's personal identity; and commercial media encourage and manipulate it so confessions of desire can be economically rationalized, linked to the buying and selling of commodities, and commodified themselves as products to be bought and sold. I do not argue that today's confession is yesterday's; or that the confessions that took place in the fourth century Christian monasteries Foucault studied are identical to those that structure the ex-gay movement. I argue that ex-gay confession is part of a long genealogy that reaches back to those monasteries, and elements of their practices, modified and modified again, are still in play today, even as they continue to be modified. Therefore I do not impose Foucault's analysis of confession on ex-gay discourse. Rather I see in ex-gay discourse Foucault's research, and in Foucault's research I see the seeds of the ex-gay movement. My theory and research developed in tandem, each opening up new areas of discovery in the other. It is true, Foucault drew primarily (although not exclusively) on modern European and ancient Greco-Roman and medieval sources, and the ex-gay movement emerged out of late twentieth century American evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity. However, there is enough of a genealogical connection between the movement and

Foucault's research, especially via the *general* religious and psychological knowledges the ex-gay movement draws on, for an approach and theory rooted in his work to be very fruitful.

My methodology for this study is also Foucauldian: it is a governmental discourse analysis, a study of the governing functions of tactical and strategic statements, practices, and representations. I examine the discourse through what Foucault calls a "patiently documentary" (1998a [1971], 369) search of available texts from various communication channels. I understand statements, practices, and representations as discursive "events" erupting into and modifying larger discourses and practices of knowledge, power, and ethics (1972 [1969]; 1991; 1998b [1983]; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). I found and sampled the journalistic texts I analyzed based on key events within the debate that inspired significant coverage and then, similar to grounded theory (but still beginning with a governmental frame), I looked for repeated topics, concepts, and strategies, and categorized them according to the subject positions and objectives of the authors. As many of these texts are available online, I was able to find most through specified Google searches as well as through links made available on websites devoted to following the ex-gay debate. I found fictional and documentary texts I was not already familiar with from references within the discourse through the help of colleagues and a systematic internet search using key terms derived from my journalistic sources. I also used a TV tropes website that has categorized several examples of what it calls a "Cure Your Gays" meme across several forms of fictional media (TVTropes 2014). I sampled, categorized, and analyzed these texts based on the governing concepts, themes and strategies that emerged from my engagement with the discourse as a whole, which is how I realized that confession rather than prayer is the primary governmental strategy of the ex-gay debate (see Appendices A and B for lists of what I found¹⁷).

¹⁷ Appendix A is a chart of journalistic exposés and pop culture entertainment texts organized by release date, communication medium, genre, and the kind of judgement the text imposes on ex-gay change. Appendix B is a bibliography (separate from my References) of all ex-gay discursive texts consulted, including academic texts, organized by communication medium and whether they are pro- or anti-ex-gay.

My method, then, combines elements from Foucault's archaeological analyses of knowledge with his later genealogical analyses of power and ethics. It is a descriptive method that involves categorizing and mapping relevant statements via the discursive texts within which they occur. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) describe a Foucauldian analysis as focusing on the objectives of *serious* speech acts (48, my italics).¹⁸ I describe the objectives of *governmental* speech acts. Unlike linguistic discourse analysis, this is not an analysis of language itself. Foucault is not concerned (at least methodologically) with how language is constructed or to what it refers or signifies, but rather with how it functions and operates (1972; 1991). Likewise, I am not concerned with the grammar of ex-gay discourse or with what (or how) it signifies ideologically. I am concerned with how its manifest meanings function to control, persuade or resist within a system of conflicted ex-gay statements that also function to control, persuade or resist. Also, unlike critical discourse analysis, this is not an analysis of how power understood in terms of dominance is developed and maintained as a system of inequality; rather it is an analysis of how different forms of governing statements and practices operate in relation to each other within a contested discursive formation. A governmental approach includes analyses of power relations, but it does not assume power always operates as dominance nor always leads to systematic inequality. A governmental approach assumes power operates positively as well as negatively, usually in relation to different types of knowledge and forms of self-governance, and it is often resisted, especially in discursive formations that are still in flux.

A discursive formation is the constantly changing "totality" of statements and events that form any given discourse and no unity or agreement among statements need be assumed—even

¹⁸ Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) call Foucault's approach "interpretive analytics" and argue that, while initially semi-structuralist in its attempt to establish the theoretical rules of discourse, it became post-hermeneutic and interpretive when his archaeological method was incorporated into and began to serve his genealogical method. They show that Foucault's methods—archaeology *and* genealogy—work in sync to account for *how* discourses and practices are used, for the specific *roles* they play, and for how they came to *operate* as they do *over time*, within the contingency of history. Although they over-emphasize Foucault's early methods as autonomous and self-referential, and over-emphasize an early concern with domination (and misunderstand his refusal of absolutes as something philosophical rather than methodological), they insist that his methods are always specific, disciplined, pragmatic, and diagnostic.

if speaking agents within the formation often seek to achieve such a unity, or at least to achieve the appearance of it. The ex-gay movement and the debate that surrounds it is just such a formation, but the way science is deployed in the debate characterizes the formation not as a formalized unity but as a perpetually incomplete and conflicted formation characterized by exceptional disunity. Thus a governmental discourse analysis recognizes that statements are themselves frequently modified through the counter-governance of other statements and representations (Foucault 1991; 2007c; 2010; see also Bevir 2010; Dean 1994; Lemke 2011). Foucault established the functions and objectives of discursive statements, practices, and problematizations in terms of objects, subject positions, notions and concepts, and tactics and strategies, but without assuming any constancy to such objectives or related terms (1972). The formation of governmental statements and discourses of knowledge is referential to a domain of objects, to that which is talked about through practices of delimitation and specification, but understood by the researcher as historically specific and usually in flux. In the ex-gay debate, that can be understood as the domain constituted by the movement and its antagonists, and by the field of objects at play within its discourse, including sexual orientation, sexual desire, sexual acts, the sexual body, God, Jesus, the Bible, the family, and more. The fluctuation of this domain can be seen in the way the ex-gay body as a “changeable” object has been redefined in terms of life-long struggle rather than immediate cure because numerous psychological studies of the ex-gay body failed to demonstrate unambiguous change.

The formation of governmental statements and discourses of knowledge is also subject defining, both normatively and enunciatively, not only in terms of how subjects are talked about, but in terms of how discourses, practices, and problematizations situate the speaking subject in terms of historically specific and fluctuating positions of authority and fields of knowledge. Thus the space opened up by ex-gay discourse allows subjects (for, against, or neutral) to take up a position to speak of the movement and its beliefs and practices in terms of their positions as ex-

gay participants, ex-ex-gay survivors, pastors, ministers, priests, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, sociologists, politicians, gay activists, journalists, writers, film producers, and even economists. Discursive formations are also part of associated fields of statements characterized by both their regularity and their discontinuity—which is to say, statements understood as governmental events are situated within a specific field that is characterized by different types, levels, and functions of compatibility and contradiction that are historically specific and in flux. The field of coordination, coexistence, and subordination in which ex-gay and anti-ex-gay notions and concepts appear (and are defined, applied, manipulated, and transformed) include concepts like confession, sin, redemption, biblical truth, perversion, repression, the reparative drive, the family dynamic—even gay, straight, and bisexual, but also political economic concepts like rational choice, consumer fraud, and earned media. However, these notions and concepts are conflicted and debated; so within the movement’s own discourse the notion of homosexuality is denied as a valid category because translated biblical truth appears to forbid it; yet in pro-gay Christian discourses the notion of homosexuality *as sin* is denied because historically contextualized biblical truth is not thought to condemn modern loving same-sex relations but rather ancient forms of idolatrous same-sex child abuse.

Discursive formations are materially distinct but thematically and strategically repeatable through different mediums of communication, through different forms of change, transformation and struggle, but they are always caught up in distinct and fluctuating historical webs. Mediums of communication are key here. Foucault says that discursive statements are “*always* given through some material medium” (1972, 100, my italics), which operates as “a space in which [statements] are used and repeated” (ibid, 106). In the ex-gay debate, strategies and choices employed both for and against the movement, including confession, prayer, Bible study, reparative therapy (a form of conversion therapy), group therapy, pro-gay counter therapies, polemics, biblical interpretation and reinterpretation, and even advertising, dramatization, and

satire are deployed through mediums of communication such as preaching and counselling, therapeutic transference, academic and popular book publishing, and newspapers, radio, television, and the internet. Indeed, communication channels are of primary importance in the ex-gay debate because the choice to advertise the movement in newspapers and broadcasting was what catapulted ex-gay change into the public sphere and created the debate as it now exists.

The necessity of relying as heavily as I do on commercial popular culture for my sources is because the ex-gay movement did not become enough of a public phenomenon to be studied *as* a discursive formation until after it became an object of debate in commercial media. At that point ex-gay discourse came into its own as a discrete set of statements and events seeking cultural legitimization and scientific formalization through print, broadcasting, and new media. Foucault describes a discursive formation's development in terms of crossing four thresholds: a) the threshold of positivity, when a "discursive practice achieves individuality and autonomy" even if still in conflict; b) the threshold of epistemologization, when a model of "verification and coherence" is articulated even if there are still competing models; c) the threshold of scientificity [or disciplinarily] when statements come to comply with rules and laws for the construction of propositions and begin to escape serious conflict; and d) the threshold of formalization, when the discourse is able "to deploy the formal edifice that it constitutes" and legitimize itself without serious opposition from within or without (1972, 186-7). Mathematics, chemistry, and physics are all formalized sciences, even if new discoveries and modifications are frequent; but crossing all four thresholds is not necessary for a formation, nor is there any specific timeline or proper order of succession. The "science" of the ex-gay debate has not been legitimized or formalized, on either side; and not just because psychology is a "soft" science. Rather, some discursive formations are always characterized by discontinuity, breaks, and conflicts wherein a battle for

supremacy erupts between competing statements, subject positions, objectives, concepts, and strategies. In such cases, legitimization and formalization sometimes never occur.¹⁹

My comparative use of discursive examples from academic, journalistic and pop cultural sources, some factual and some fictional, is also justified by my method. While analytically I am sometimes concerned with factual accuracy in the discourse, my larger concern is with how discourse governs. A fictional depiction of the movement such as *But I'm a Cheerleader* can be just as influential in terms of how the movement is understood and perceived as can a factual exposé such as Wayne Besen's *Anything But Straight: Unmasking the Scandals and Lies Behind the Ex-gay Myth* (2003). My analysis understands discourse not to *represent* truth and knowledge but to *generate* truth and knowledge; and the truth-effects of fiction can often be just as powerful as the truth-effects of non-fiction. That can be seen in ex-gay debate itself, via the often hysterical responses from within the movement to unwanted fictional popular culture depictions of how the movement operates (see Chapter 4). Whether factual or fictional, whether academic or commercial, discursive statements, governmental practices, and ethical problematizations compete with, combine with, cooperate with, and change, modify, and resist each other in games of truth that operate as wills to knowledge, wills to power, and wills to truth; and in the ex-gay movement all of these events intersect with the long established obligation to confess oneself.

Providing an Original Contribution: a Political Economy of Ex-gay Communication

This study will provide an original contribution to ex-gay research by establishing the discursive and confessional conditions of existence of the movement, not just in terms of religion and psychology, but also in terms of politics, economics, and mediated communication. To date, no ex-gay study has considered such a wide range of sources as comprehensively. I will examine

¹⁹ The focus of Foucault's early work was indeed scientific discourses, albeit the "soft" human sciences. However, he also acknowledges, even in his early work, the possibility of discursive formations of political knowledge, ethical constructions, and aesthetic representations. He writes, "Archaeological territories may extend to 'literary' or 'philosophical' texts, as well as scientific ones. Knowledge is to be found not only in demonstrations, it can also be found in fiction, reflexion, narrative accounts, institutional regulations, and political decisions" (1072, 183-4).

depictions in entertainment as well as journalistic reports and exposés, and I will treat academic studies, especially the psychological literature, as part of a mediated public debate. By mapping the discourse across its many forms, I will provide a Foucauldian re-description that shows how a movement constituted historically by religious and psychological forms of confession has been altered by our contemporary political economy; and how our political economy is itself constituted by confession. Foucault (1990a) tells us confession is “one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth” (59), and that in the twentieth century “all kinds of mechanisms everywhere—in advertising, books, novels, films, and widespread pornography—invite the individual to pass from this daily expression of sexuality to the institutional and expensive confession of his sexuality to the psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, or sexologist” (2003a, 170). This study will update Foucault’s statements to show how the quadrature of confessing sin and disease, testifying doctrine and truth, sacrificing oneself to religious and psychological authority, and being born again in an identity politics of self-emergence, has been modified by our contemporary neoliberal political economy.

Most of the academic literature on the movement is comprised of psychological studies of efficacy and harm. While the majority are critical (APA Task Force 2009; Drescher 1998; Drescher, Shidlo and Schroeder 2002; Drescher and Zucker 2006; Hancock, Gock and Haldeman 2012), one is neutral (Svensson 2003), and some conducted by Christian and Jewish identified researchers are supportive (Jones and Yarhouse 2007; Nicolosi 1997; Nicolosi, Byrd and Potts 2000). The most well-known and controversial study, conducted by Dr. Robert Spitzer, was presented in 2001 as a conference paper and published in 2003. That study, which concluded some gays and lesbians can change their orientation, is considered supportive by most, but prior to apologizing for it in 2012 (see Chapters 2 and 4), Spitzer insisted it was objective and neutral. Yet it nearly legitimized the movement, receiving widespread attention because of Spitzer’s lead role on the American Psychiatric Association committee that declassified homosexuality as a

mental illness in 1973. The study, however, exemplifies problems with most psychological research into ex-gay efficacy and harm because it is riddled with methodological issues related to measurement, subject selection, and unreliable self-reports (i.e. confessions). There are also several sociological and ethnographic books and articles that focus on the subjective experiences of ex-gays and some confirm the movement's focus on confession (Barton 2012; Erzen 2006; Gerber 2008; Moon 2005; Wolkomir 2006); however, as noted above, few address just how important the practice is. My study surpasses that research, treating the movement as a mediated cultural phenomenon historically constituted by religion and psychology but permeated by cost-benefit calculations, marketing protocols, and an impoverished discourse of entrepreneurship.

Within communication studies there are a number of analyses of ex-gay news coverage and advertising that are narrowly focused on the rhetoric of specific case studies (Fetner 2005; Lund and Renna 2006; Stewart 2005; 2008). My study will address the larger political economy of ex-gay communication as it operates in a conflicted field of cultural production through processes of commodification, structuration, and mediation. Alongside those analyses, I will consider more polemical accounts that operate directly as part of the public debate. In news, magazine and book publishing there are numerous high profile journalistic exposés, most of which seek to expose the movement as a fraud (Arana 2012; Besen 2003; Cox 2010; Denizet-Lewis 2011; Slaughter 2013a; Swartz 2011). There are also several commercial “self-help” books and participant autobiographies, both from ex-gays justifying the movement (Chambers 2009; Dallas 2003; Paulk, A. 2003; Paulk, J. 1998), and from survivors condemning it as religious abuse (see Marks 2009; Rix 2010; Tousey 2006). There are also justifications and condemnations from religious leaders who do not identify as ex-gay or ex-ex-gay (Harvey 1996; Pennington 1989). By analyzing the popular discourse surrounding the movement as heated polemics that operate in governmental, confessional form, this study will escape the dichotomous

declarations of right and wrong professed by so many so as to dismantle ex-gay truth-claims and show that most agree on the necessity of confessing desire and testifying fundamental truth.

Finally, there are copious amounts of popular culture depictions and reports spanning multiple media platforms across 15 years (see Appendices A & B). They are published as books, in newspapers, and in magazines (both serious and satirical); they are produced as news and current affairs segments for television and radio, as episodes of daytime talk shows, as feature documentaries, and as fictional films and television programs (both comedic and dramatic). There are also pro- and anti-ex-gay websites, and numerous ex-gay and ex-ex-gay confessionals posted online as chat board messages, blogs, and YouTube videos. To date, however, there are no analyses of the movement as it appears in popular entertainment, and there are no analyses that consider the political and economic implications of an increasingly commodified discourse on the confessional structure of the movement. This study aims to fill that gap.

On a political economic level, it will show that both ex-gay and anti-ex-gay discourses are part of a conjoined field of neoliberal and neoconservative governmentalities. Similar to but expanding on Wolkomir's claim that both ex-gay and ex-ex-gay support groups privilege heteronormativity, I will show how the entire ex-gay debate assumes the same political economic subjectivity, wherein one's sexuality becomes the basis of one's identity as constituted by rational choice assumptions and risk management. In addition to offering the only analysis of the ex-gay movement in popular entertainment, I offer the only exploration of the movement in a legal context of consumer fraud. In that light I will elucidate how the movement's own economic and political tactics and strategies were appropriated and turned against it. As we will learn, the movement's entry into mass media through a politically motivated advertising campaign turned ex-gay therapy, largely unknown in the public sphere until that point, first into a commodity designed to create symbolic capital in the culture wars, and second into an object of political contempt in popular culture. This study will demonstrate that it was the movement's own

communicative tactics and strategies that orchestrated that change. By attempting to deploy individual consumer choice and justifications of antigay legislation to justify itself, the movement saw contract law and family values legislation designed to protect children from ex-gay harm deployed against it. Once that happened, the movement lost control of its own discourse in mainstream media even as it legitimized itself in Christian popular culture.

At the level of advocacy and strategy I will show that while antigay Christian belief systems may be the most effective short term targets to further delegitimize ex-gay claims, because confessions and testimonies of desire, sin and identity pervade the entire ex-gay debate, the real problem is the culture of confession. At the level of theory and method I will show the importance of Foucault's research to critical political economy and media studies. Whereas there is ample use of Foucault's research in cultural studies and religious studies, and communication studies sometimes utilizes Foucauldian discourse analyses, his methods and research are seldom deployed systematically and almost never in relation to governmentality as a concept that bridges the gaps between his different methods and periods of thought. Foucault tended to use what C.G. Prado (1992) calls an "acid bath of... redescription" to analyze historically elite discourses through studies of archived professional documents (15). I will show how a similar kind of acid bath of re-description can be used to analyze contemporary media and pop culture discourses.

One limitation of this study is that it tends to collapse male and female subjectivities together. That is partly a result of a blind spot in Foucault's research that often (but not always) neglects female points of view. However, that is precisely because he studied elite historical discourses, almost all of which privilege men. At the same time, ex-gay discourse also privileges male points of view. Yes, there are some strong female voices in the debate (ex-gay Anne Paulk and lesbian journalist Rachel Maddow, for example), but most voices in the debate are male and most ex-gay studies involve mainly male subjects. Even Erzen's and Wolkomir's studies are of all male groups. The fact is that more men participate in the ex-gay movement than women. A

feminist history of the ex-gay movement could be very productive and enlightening, but that was beyond the scope of this study. It is also possible, of course, that given Judith Butler's feminist work on sex, gender, and performativity (1990; 1993; 2004), psychology and power (1997), ethical self-narratives (2005), and religion in the public sphere (2011) her research could be important for a full understanding of how ex-gay change operates discursively and in practice. But I defer engaging with her here because Butler roots much of her own work in Foucault and my focus is on confession and neoliberalism understood through Foucault as a primary source and political economy understood through Foucault. The relations between Butler's work and ex-gay discourse could be fruitful future research.

Outlining the Chapters: From Confession to Political Economy and Back Again

This dissertation will show how the use of confessions of self-renunciation and fundamentalist true-belief as technologies of self-emergence sacrifices not just the ex-gay self but all subjects in the debate to unstable and fundamentalist truth games. Ex-gay participants do not try to pray the gay away, they try to confess and testify it away, and ex-gay survivors try to confess and testify the movement away. Chapter 1 will provide a history of the movement and establish the conditions of emergence of the debate in terms of the primary practices underlying it: confessions of sin, disease and harm, faith and true belief, self-sacrifice, and self-emergence. As part of my analysis, Foucault's genealogy of confession will be outlined in more detail and his account of confessions of self-sacrifice becoming confessions of truth becoming confessions of self-emergence will be explained. However, a common understanding of Foucault in which it is assumed he establishes a clear historical "acts versus identity" dichotomy will be questioned. Just as confessional self-sacrifice operates alongside confessional self-emergence in the ex-gay movement, so too does homosexuality problematized in terms of behaviour operate alongside gay rights problematized in terms of identity. In short, this chapter will operate as a history of the

movement, a genealogy of its primary practice, and a functional account of how Foucault's analytics of confession can be used to describe the movement's emergence and historical constitution.

At the heart of Chapter 2 is the irony of a consumer fraud lawsuit that resulted from the movement using mainstream advertising to "come out" in the public sphere. It will cautiously employ a rational choice cost-benefit analysis (but still using a governmental methodology) to quantify the financial and psychological costs of ex-gay change. It will also begin the process of establishing the movement's conditions of existence by describing the commodification of its confessional practices at the level of individual choice. Here I will argue that in spite of the rhetoric and legal accusations of fraud deployed against ex-gay change, the movement is not a financial scam selling a snake oil cure. Rather it is an organization run by true believers who confess their true beliefs as life-long labour. The problem is, they cannot admit the truth that their movement has been (self)-commodified, nor can they confess the scientific truth that there is psychological risk in ex-gay change. Furthermore, the movement's language of choice is undercut by an entrepreneurship limited only to the production of heteronormativity, and by an ex-gay subjectivity derived from confessional obedience rather than entrepreneurial choice.

In Chapter 3 I turn to the "culture wars" of American neoconservative politics. I will show how the movement's turn to politics left it open to anti-ex-gay legislative action because of a slow but distinct shift in societal attitudes following the high profile murder of Matthew Shepard. By combining a Foucauldian analytics of strategic truth games with Anthony Giddens' concept of structuration and the political economy of Pierre Bourdieu, I will show how the interaction of structure and agency in the cultural capital of publically confessed truth reveals the ex-gay movement as a bankrupt form of symbolic power. The chapter will also use queer political economy to critique and contextualize the limits of a rational choice analysis. It will also account for how the ex-gay movement was redesigned by the Christian Right in the 1990s to

fulfill a purpose beyond ex-gay change: to try and eliminate gay and lesbian politics (and gay and lesbian identities) through the strategic promotion of a kinder, gentler form of “love the sinner, hate the sin” antigay politics. However, that strategy failed because the unexpected event of Matthew Shepard’s murder shone an international spotlight on antigay prejudice that even the discourse of loving the sinner could not overcome. In short, this chapter will show how the movement’s occupation of an awkward space between neoliberalism and neo-conservatism saw its own legislative tactics turned against it as gay rights groups successfully campaigned for their own “family values” legislation to protect children from the ex-gay movement.

In Chapter 4 I will analyze the mediation of the ex-gay debate in news and popular culture contrasting Habermas’s ideal of reasoned deliberation with Foucault’s analytics of tactics and strategies of control. Beginning with an account of the media frenzy surrounding the case of Zach Stark, a teenager forced into an ex-gay residential program by his parents, I will trace the consequences of attracting adherents and public support using “earned media,” or media coverage not paid for by the movement. I will also consider the impact of Alan Chambers’ and Robert Spitzer’s confessed apologies on the media debate, both of which operated as negative earned media. The increased visibility generated by ex-gay media left it open to journalistic scrutiny, public scorn, and scathing dramatizations and satires. Whereas the movement initially benefited from media’s tendency to oversimplify complicated issues and emphasize sensationalism and controversy over reasoned analysis, those same tendencies led it to lose control of its own image. However, by noting a different trajectory of the movement’s mediation in Christian popular culture, I will show how its creation of positive cultural capital rooted in compassion over condemnation was not a complete failure. The movement is still accepted in conservative Christian communities.

The ex-gay movement remains a contemporary problem to be solved. In spite of the movement’s neoliberal discourse, legislative lobbying, and earned media having backfired, and

in spite of several high profile confessed apologies, ex-gay change is not dead. The movement has certainly lost the public relations war it began 15 years ago in mainstream media, but it has been legitimized in its own parallel world of Christian popular culture. Short of transforming the confessional nature of contemporary society, unless the true beliefs around which the ex-gay debate revolves are changed, the movement will continue to recruit confused subjects, who experience unwanted same-sex desire, into contradictory and unstable truth games.

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