

# INTRODUCING QUEER YOUTH CULTURES

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Over the past decade, queer youth have become innovative participants in do-it-yourself media projects, popular culture narratives, local drag performances, anti-oppression activisms, online communities, and music subcultures. Involving a broad array of media including television, photography, Internet, film and print, as well as utilizing several modes of representation including visual, written/spoken word, and performative embodiments, queer youth cultures defy narrow definitions and open up new ways of understanding and imagining what it means to be a youth today. Queer youth challenge us to rethink the very status of gender, generation, sexuality, and culture, and they push us to become nuanced in the ways we read, watch, and listen to young people telling their own stories and envisioning their futures. As demonstrated throughout this book, contemporary queer youth and their cultural practices are not classifiable as either mainstream or marginal, they are neither inside nor outside dominant cultural institutions; rather, they criss-cross commercial mass media, grassroots subcultural, and activist realms. Configured within multiple spaces of cultural production and consumption, a broad range of queer youth subjects have emerged to expand public spaces, corporeal relations, and textual forms. The emergence of such a rich and diverse proliferation of queer youth activities is practically empowering for young people, providing tools for self-expression and social communication, and also presenting opportunities for adult educators and policymakers to approach youth as smart, imaginative, and desiring cultural producers. Paying attention to queer youth as cultural and political catalysts, the essays throughout this collection attempt to recognize and value the everyday struggles and work undertaken by youth to represent themselves and their communities. At the same time,

the goal is not merely to celebrate the living cultures of queer youth but also to question and theorize the very languages and contexts through which they emerge to contest heteronormative expectations and unfold new ways of growing up and becoming queer.

Queer youth cultures call for new ways of researching, theorizing, and writing about youth. Utilizing the term “queer youth” to signify young people who identify in ways that exceed the boundaries of straight gender and/or sexual categories, the point is not to entrench a new label, but to impel contingent and unpredictable ways of naming and interpreting youth. In this sense, “queer youth” encompasses those who name themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersexual, queer, and/or questioning (GLBTTIQQ) without necessarily being confined to a narrow set of terms. Queer youth are not discursively containable, and they are not reducible to any single dimension of their embodiment, identity, or situation. The complexities of their subjectivities and social lives imbricate class, race, ethnic, geographic, and age relations through which queer youth become meaningful to themselves and others. In this sense, any attempt to understand queer youth must work against totalizing concepts and generalizing depictions, eliciting the partial and layered ways in which queer differences becomes refracted through the dialogical movements of young people.

“Queer youth” is an always, already contradictory and imperfect notion, simultaneously challenging restrictive categorizations while constructing new subjects and sites of regulation and resistance. Reclaiming this phrase as strategically useful in political, research, and policy contexts that work to support and focus attention onto marginalized youth, this approach shifts away from abstract appeals to the problem of queer youth that tend to lose touch with the messy, desiring, and materially located bodies of young people. In this sense, the very process of who, what, and how notions of “queer youth” make sense needs to be scrutinized in highly specific ways, treated as a site of analysis and critical questioning that works against binding young people within new definitional regimes of control. The goal is not to encapsulate queer youth once and for all but rather to initiate provisional and detailed analysis of the ways they precariously make and unmake sense of their lives in relation to the world around them. This approach consciously works against attempts to formulate disciplinary knowledges about who queer youth are and what they want and need, preferring to gather a loose and diverse collection of narratives staying

close to the uncertainties and challenges of queer youth cultures. Rather than define queer youth as a fixed demographic or unified concept, the chapters throughout this book work against abstractions by exploring the concrete terms through which the desires, identities, and activities of sexual and gender minority youth are constituted within the mobile life worlds of young people as they interact with popular culture, join subcultures, forge communities, and participate in political movements. Up against pervasive institutional denials, threats of physical violence, pathologizing experts, and educational neglect it is astounding how imaginative, insightful, and playful the cultures of queer youth have become despite the odds. Attending to the specificities of social experience and representation, the goal of this collection is to learn about queer youth by carefully listening to their stories and silences, as well as watching their gestures, images, and protests, while trying to avoid invasive powers of surveillance and knowledge.

#### CONTROLLING CLASSIFICATIONS OF SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH

While there is little doubt that queer youth are fashioning complex representations and collaborative projects, academic disciplines that focus on youth culture rarely seem to notice. Gloria Filax writes that “sexual minority youth are produced through their absence or as a special area of interest, as the abject Other; that is, as a deviant outsider within the realm of youth studies” (59). As queer youth enter the purview of popular and academic texts, the discourses used to describe and interpret this group of minority youth often ends up foreclosing the ambiguous, desiring, relational, and ephemeral dimensions of their experiences. When queer youth are included within educational, psychological, and social science literature, their marginalized social status is often emphasized in ways that construct them as victims. While some accounts do try to affirm the potential for queer youth survival and empowerment (Dobinson 2004; Owens 1998; Gray 1999), queer youth are frequently cast as victims of homophobic violence or heterosexist exclusion in ways that inscribe them within tropes of victimization and risk. The negative effects of subordination become the focal point of research in which queer youth are defined reactively against dominant systems and denied the chance to exceed hegemonic discursive influences. Not only are sexual minority young people repeatedly associated with pathological conditions and oppressive relations, but the subjective

contours of their lives get reiterated in terms of psychic trauma, alienation, and shame. Susan Talburt writes that “queer youth suicide became a refrain, such that article after article, essay after essay, and report after report portrayed youth as a risk through statistics on queer youth suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual transmitted diseases, homelessness, dropping out, depression, verbal and physical assaults and so on” (28). Commonsense constructions of queer youth identities fixate on their wounded status, leaving little space within which to listen for alternative youth voices that might express complex strengths, pleasures, and curiosities.

Without ignoring the social and psychic vulnerabilities of queer teens or denying raw facts about suicide and homelessness, it is important to question the ways in which queer youth are perpetually contained within stories of doom and gloom. The continual use of statistics to frame the experiences of queer youth ends up constructing them as subjects in crisis needing to be rescued and cared for by others. Characterized in terms of endangerment and victimization, the lives of queer youth become objectified, precluding nuanced ways of understanding the changing and multilayered contours of their daily lives. Mary Louise Rasmussen argues that

Scientific classifications thus perpetuate the infantilization and abjection of LGBTI-identified young people, providing a rationale for adults to act in their best interests rather than to work with them. This process may consequently have the effect of reducing young people’s agency under cover of providing them assistance. The repetition of tropes of adolescence as a stage of turmoil and stress also obfuscates peoples’ economic, scientific, strategic and psychoanalytic investments in the abjection of young people who are LGBTI identified. (141–142)

Rasmussen calls attention to the ways queer youth categorizations foreground individualized emotional and social problems that not only delimit public knowledge and policy but also constitute modes of self-representations through which youth imagine and speak about their lives. The very languages that render queer youth intelligible and unified create pathos toward sexual minority youth while at the same time undermining possibilities for questioning the very terms of normality that abject queer youth differences in the first place.

Eric Rofes calls attention to the repetitions of what he calls the “martyr-target-victim” narrative of persecution that influence how queer

youth become socially legitimized. He considers “whether repeated public use of martyr-target-victim images, narratives, visuals and historic incidents works to narrow who and what we think of as GLBT youth.” A common outcome of these images are attempts to rectify denigration through uplifting stories of acceptance and inclusion. Queer youth become integrated into normalizing models of respectable sameness in a gesture of liberal unity and equality, often at the expense of coming to terms with heterogeneous desires. Liberal notions of tolerance are upheld as the ultimate goal of youth advocacy, reversing the effects of their “deviant” minority status, while also folding young queers into the values and beliefs of majority culture. Even the most well-meaning attempts to help queer youth often fall prey to patronizing efforts to impose “healthy” normative ideals on youth in order to simplify their complexities for the sake of mainstream recognition. Empowerment becomes a sign of fitting into familiar and nonthreatening models of identity and belonging. Toward this end, progressive media accounts of a transgendered youth leading the student council or a lesbian going to the prom with her girlfriend become evidence of success and signs of positive change and integration. Within such paradigms, queer youth become valued and supported as long as they don’t challenge the status quo by looking or acting too queer. What is especially disturbing is an almost complete silence surrounding queer youth sexual pleasures, subcultural counter publics, and political resistance. Normalization works to desexualize and depoliticize youth once again, creating safe, sanitized images that conform with white middle-class standards of visibility and value.

Categorizing queer youth as passive victims or normalized subjects obscures a more fractured and complex dynamic of power and inequality through which youth negotiate their gender and sexuality across racial, national, class, ethnic, age, and ability boundaries of desire and identification. The racialized politics of queer youth are both concealed and constituted in the universalizing and oppositional terms of scientific discourses. Whiteness remains the unmarked center of heteronormative ideologies as well as the unacknowledged frame of evaluation against which youth are defined as different. As such, whether interpretations focus on youth victimization or resilience, the assumed status of acceptance, health, and integration are contained within hegemonic racialized ideologies. This has theoretical implications in terms of what is considered meaningful and valued within the field of GLBTIQ studies, and it also influences the empirical scope of what and who count as appropriate research subjects. In this way, languages

of risk highlight a narrow range of individual and social conditions, failing to consider how historical experiences such as racial discrimination and marginalization, immigration, poverty, cultural and linguistic alienation, and isolation might destabilize the narrow parameters within which queer youth are studied. Homogenizing notions of youth sexual identities guiding academic texts, popular cultures, and social services become the site of exclusionary ways of seeing and knowing that contribute to the oppression of youth who do not fit in or measure up. The problem, in other words, is not the individual gendered bodies or sexual desires of youth of color but rather the structural norms of white visibility that discount and erase their specificity.

How queer youth are conceptualized powerfully influences which young people are considered worthy of attention and resources and also the ways youth are approached and assisted at institutional and interpersonal levels. Along these lines, the editors of the groundbreaking anthology *Youth and Sexuality* claim that

The complexity of queer youths' subjectivity, agency, sexuality, and cultural practices is flattened by a dominant framing of them in terms of danger and victimization. If adults tacitly acknowledge queer youths' desire, subjecthood, or creativity they do not frequently actively address these elements of their lives or consider them as something from which adults might learn. Queer youth agency, whether linked to sexual desire or activity, or to projects of crafting the self and relations to others, is relegated to the domain of the unthinkable. (Rasmussen, Talburt, and Rofes, 7)

The means through which queer youth are named and interpreted becomes profoundly important in shaping a social, cultural, and psychic process of recognition and comprehension. What tend to get overlooked in the field of sexual minority youth studies are theories and methods that turn attention away from individual problems and onto hierarchical institutional formations. Such approaches would not necessarily ignore the subjective feelings and voices of queer youth but work to situate them within broader contexts of social, economic, and symbolic power that simultaneously delimit and enable possibilities for personal transformation and collective resistance. Rather than congeal assumptions, such critical approaches trouble adult expectations, unsettle norms, and exceed liberal terms of social inclusion.

This book is propelled forward in an attempt to counter prescriptive and authoritative discourses that claim to know who queer youth are and what they need and want. The challenge becomes generating representational styles and reflexive knowledges that question how the category “queer youth” is being deployed? Asking: Why are queer youth being studied in the first place? For whose benefit and under what precise terms and conditions? Who counts and is visible? What ideas and issues become centered or elided? How do racialized norms shape what constitutes queer identity and practice? What are the languages through which queer youth articulate and shape their identities? Is it possible to decipher these languages ethically and establish a dialogue? Who has a stake in asking these questions? How might these questions be answered without finality or closure? What is lost instituting formal knowledges out of the living and ineffable relations of marginalized youth? Are there aspects of youth experience and culture that remain unrepresentable? At what point should youth be left alone outside the prying gaze of research? Framing research and writing around such questions shifts away from static knowledges onto temporal and culturally shifting subjects that leave room for contestation and doubts, multiple identifications, as well as moments of disidentification. Remaining connected to local communities yet open to globalized networks and movements, the very status of young queer selfhood is shaped in dialogical terms.

#### QUEERING YOUTH STUDIES

Against this backdrop of popular media, public policies and academic texts that peg queer youth down as being “at risk,” invisible, suicidal, unruly, pathological, unstable, deviant, vulnerable, and isolated or else heroic and normatively accomplished, I am interested in reorienting research and writing toward culturally transformative engagements that are temporally and spatially located. Beyond statistics and discouraging narratives, energetic communications are forged by youth who refuse to be simplistically characterized according to their wounds and abjections. Marnina Gonick writes that “they have refused to be rendered invisible or to accept the negative stereotypes thrust upon them. Instead they have worked to produce positive self-identifications and representations and to create the social conditions that will open up new possibilities for living life as queer people” (137). The point is not to discount feelings of shame and social struggles, but to become attuned to ambivalent and willful responses of young people, recognizing moments

where they simultaneously avow what has been hurtful and oppressive and pursue what inspires them to affirm their queerness. Research that forgoes the quest for transparent stories, easy definitions, and coherent identities does not result in confusion but acknowledges that for many marginalized youth, surviving depends on averting either/or logics, embracing the challenges of growing up with contradictions. Queer youth cultures unfurl an assemblage of affects, images, words, relations that challenge the containment of youth demographics and the bounded conceptual mappings of subcultural studies. Research becomes oriented toward ephemeral and nonlinear articulations of youth storytelling, stylizations, protests, and performances. Rather than congeal these mobile physical and verbal actions, the aim is to spur dialogical interpretations with a continual reflexive awareness about the very languages and values used to translate and theorize queer youth identities and differences. Queer youth have the potential of invigorating theory through their culturally expressive assertions of desire in a culture that scorns the queer perversions of young love and lust. It is the subtle ways such affirmations defy punitive logics and moralistic judgments as well as bypassing normalizing expert assessments that queer possibilities arise for thinking about youth.

Cultural studies research into the everyday lives of youth has called attention to a richly textured process of meaning-making through fashion, music, dance, and media participation. Focused on the pragmatic edges of media making and reception, this field of youth study loosens essentializing categorizations by following what and how youth create meanings for themselves. Angela McRobbie focuses on productive communications between youth within alternative subcultural formations:

To ignore the intense activity of cultural production as well as its strongly aesthetic dimensions (in graphics, fashion, design, retail and music production) is to miss a key part of subcultural life—the creation of a whole new way of life, an alternative to higher education. . . . The point is then that far from being merely the commercial low ebb of the subculture, as far removed from resistance as it is possible to imagine, these activities can be seen as central to it. They are also expressions of change and social transformation. (72)

McRobbie decenters prescriptive and isolating narratives as she traces the vibrant cultural work of young people across overlapping contexts.



Her focus is on the ways youth craft intricate subcultural worlds in which they work, play, learn, and socialize beyond official institutional regimes, analyzing opportunities for innovative and informal pedagogies and circuits of communication. In a similar vein, Paul Willis details the symbolic creativity of young people as they make use of media technologies, experiment with styles, combine textual samples and adorn themselves in ways that defy the strictly commercial intentions of media industries. The ingenuity of youth cultural practices and perspectives have become a key source of analysis in several recent texts focused on how youth make media that are receptive to the ways youth devise alternative cultures in collaborative ways. Mary Celeste Kearney follows the ingenuity of contemporary girl media makers, writing that “many girl media producers rely on the practices of appropriation and detournement to reconfigure commercial cultural artifacts in to personalized creations that speak more directly to their concerns, needs, fantasies and pleasures” (13). Along these lines, what many cultural analysts share is attentiveness to the responsive and living languages through which shared meanings are crafted, negotiated through consumer culture ideologies, yet irreducible to static commodifications. Thinking in-between self and others, subjectivities and signs, institutions and experiences, global media and local participation, empirically grounded and mediated youth research enables nuanced interpretive practices.

Pushing empirical research even further to elaborate emotional contours and embodied signifying relations between youth, scholars have begun to analyze the speech acts and corporeal displays of youth through performative methodologies. Interrogating how youth practically use media languages to constitute and resist cultural identifications, performative analysis traces signs redeployed in the casual conversations of youth. Attention focuses on what youth do and say rather than on defining who youth are, following the ways media fictions are circulated by youth to address shared conditions of experience. Greg Dimitriadis writes that such performative elaborations of youth culture become vital in attending to collisions between the experiential body and media saturated environments, framing research around complex discursive systems as well as nuanced responses in the lives of young people. At the same time it is important to acknowledge that a pervasive lack of attention to the cultural lifeworlds of queer youth have impoverished even the most innovative areas of youth studies. At the level of empirical content as well as methodological design and theoretical analysis, a broad field of youth cultural studies remain heteronormatively configured. While it is productive to draw upon existing

textual and ethnographic youth research, theorizing queer experiences also calls for closer attention to complex sexually desiring selves often left out of empirical research on youth.

Framing youth in terms of queer performative cultural and political engagements, this book refocuses attention onto active production and deployment of discourses by youth themselves. Queer theories help to direct attention onto socioculturally mediated citational practices, foregrounding sexuality within youth culture research as a process of open-ended self-representation. The very status of normative sex, sexual, and gender categories become the site of critical inquiry, shifting interrogation away from an individualizing preoccupation with the aberrations of young individuals who fall outside dominant classifications. Using queer theories to think through youth cultures enables interpretive work attuned to fractured, unexpected and shifting contours of selves, communities, subcultures, and politics by, for, and about young subjects.

Many theorists have deployed the notion “queer” to signify performative dynamics of doing rather than determinate identities (Butler 1990; Fuss 1991; Johnson 2005; Munoz 1991; Sedgwick 1993). Within this body of writing, emphasis is placed on how identifications are practiced and struggled over within specific times and places. Rather than delimit exactly who is queer or what constitutes their queerness, efforts turn to analyzing the ways heteronormative knowledges work to naturalize and dichotomize differences. Gender and sexual subjects are not fixed entities to be pinned down and catalogued but rather they are investigated through constellations of words, actions, and interpretations. Identifications and desires emerge as constitutive activities, which according to Judith Butler have no foundational truth apart from a process of articulation, claiming that “if the ‘reality’ of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ which gender performances ostensibly express” (1990, 278). Performative frameworks highlight dynamic and complex articulations, Butler claims that “one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (272).

In a similar vein, Diana Fuss writes that “sexual identity may be less a function of knowledge than performance, or, in Foucauldian terms, less a matter of final discovery than perpetual invention” (7). Attending to fluid and relational languages, bodies, and pleasures, possibilities for invention are nevertheless configured through the specific

powers and constraints of material and symbolic systems. Hegemonic social norms and boundaries are not transcended but are reworked in the flux of daily enactments of speech and embodied practices. Judith Butler insists that performativity involves a “reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (1993, 12–13), a continual process of reworking, disturbing, and transforming the limits of normalizing discourses through psychic and collective engagements. Habitual repetitions both reproduce and alter normative identities and expectations, and it is precisely in the slippages and gaps where queer genders and sexualities emerge. A simultaneity of controlling discourses and destabilizing activities calls attention to the precarious dimensions of queer performativity, in between what we expect and know about youth and what expands our frameworks of intelligibility. Performative ways of thinking about identity decenter liberal norms of rational individualized subjecthood, turning attention onto relations that both invoke and question multiple conjunctions of desire and identification, suggesting so much more than can ever be known in advance or guaranteed in the present.

Such pliable notions of performativity as an embodied signifying activity through which subjects come to transform themselves allow for new ways of understanding youth enculturation. At the same time metatheoretical texts rarely speak to the social and semiotically volatile worlds of youth. When cultural examples are studied by queer theorists, they have tended to focus on the sophisticated maneuverings of adult cultural production and reception, ignoring the unique predicaments of young people. Generational hierarchies are unwittingly constructed, which tend to separate adult and youth cultures and implicitly privilege the former, leaving youth stranded as neither fully belonging within mainstream heterosexist cultural research nor integrated within queer cultural niches. While poststructuralist queer theories inform many facets of this book, tensions arise between abstract conceptualization and the changing lifeworlds of youth. The point is to learn to recognize how youth name and unname who they are or want to become, harnessing queer theories as analytical tools grounded in the practical and situated meanings that are relevant and important to youth.

In many ways, youth as a time of transition and flux, in between childhood and adulthood, renders the status of “queer” highly resonant to young people pressured by normative developmental ideals of self and reproductive narratives of maturation. “Queer” has become part of the vernacular modes of expression and communication of young people today, deployed as a noun, verb, and adjective; youth articulate themselves

in polyvalent ways. This demonstrates what Donald Hall calls “the utility of reconciling adjectives with nouns and then energizing them into verbs—of transforming descriptors into identities into actions” (18). Taken up as a noun, youth affirm their gender and sexual differences, on the other hand they use “queer” as an adjective to suggest a rich and layered sense of self, evoking a transitional process, refusing to define themselves once and for all. “Queer” also becomes a way of referring to collective movements that include yet go beyond their individual experiences. As a self-descriptor, “queer” is often used by youth to affirm a specific sense of self and community affiliations rather than to foster indeterminacy or deconstructive detachment. This points to the organic ways youth signify and theorize their genders and sexualities, using “queer” as a heuristic device that helps them navigate adult reasoning and regulations. Sometimes “queer” is deployed as a purposefully vague term, opaque and broad enough for youth to escape capture within minority youth classifications. Youth also devise queer reading strategies, engaging creatively with popular culture texts through imaginative perspectives. At other times “queer” is used to inflect ethnic, racial, and national identifications, consciously marking out multiple locations and challenging any claims to universality. Embracing queer notions as a living language responsive of their ongoing insubordination to heteronormative codes, youth claim the term “queer” to accommodate their shame, fears, doubts, rage, and curiosities. All the while, some youth prefer other terms that address them more directly as transgender, bisexual, gay, or lesbian. Paying attention to how a generation of young people has appropriated or refused “queer” to name their complexities, it becomes important to grapple with its impossibly loose and decentered tendencies. Stretching the parameters of adult-centered queer scholarship, this book reconfigures queer theories of cultural and psychic enactment within the diverse school, family, and peer networks of youth. Paying close attention to the provisional representational practices of youth, recognizing that the notion of “queer” is contested as youth come-of-age in the flux of material histories and social contexts.

Grounding queer speculations in diverse and culturally expansive worlds of youth experiences, I borrow from E. Patrick Johnson’s elaborations of “quare” studies as part of an emerging field of black queer theory. Overcoming the abstract and white privileged textual abstractions of performative theories by returning theory to the fleshed out mediations of memories, powers, and corporeal knowledges, Johnson explores new modes of research and representation that criss-cross

experiential narratives, material structures, and poststructural analysis. Johnson writes that “quare”

not only speaks across identities, it articulates identities as well. “Quare” offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges. . . . I want to maintain the inclusivity and playful spirit of “queer” that animates much of queer theory, but I also want to jettison its homogenizing tendencies. (127)

Reading queer subjects through the twists and turns of vernacular languages and embedded social relations—attending to how people speak, act, look, and feel in particular and grounded situations—Johnson bridges ethnography and theory to touch base with critical and creative perspectives of queer people of color. Inscribing his subjectivity into theoretical inquiry transforms the status of authority to focus on an expert perspective that implicates personally recollected struggles and pleasures as inextricable from how he frames the lives of other queers. Moving away from detached universalization, “quare” studies provides a way to grapple with the racialized, class, and national contours of youth, situating sexuality and gender variance within rich and interwoven narratives that defy scientific reification. Theory becomes integrally connected to the experiential relations of queer subjects as they act out their desires within and between communities. Without assuming transparent access to individual experiences, Johnson interweaves them within a reflexive analysis of language and power, as part of a critical process of reading and writing queer lives from multiple perspectives.

This move to enjoin reflexive ethnography and theory becomes crucial in directing queer youth research in ways attuned to the innumerable personalized and collectively shaped expressions of self, refusing to stop the flow of relations and stories for the sake of scientific clarity and control. But while queer pluralities are embraced, it is vital to analyze the hierarchical formations of differences between those subjects who become more visible and recognized as sexual minority youth and those who are erased and marginalized within discursive practices. Questioning the terms of intelligibility and inclusivity of research calls for reflection on the boundaries limiting who, where, what, and how subjects stake out claims to queer youth identifications. Queer youth research positions itself precariously between a critical understanding of the institutional legacies and continuing social circumstances that

work to “other” gender and sexual variant young people, and an appreciation of the inventiveness of young people who devise alternative styles and spaces of cultural participation and meaning. This collection tries to examine heterogeneous areas and examples of queer youth culture so as to give readers insight into their singularities and interconnections. While the book endeavors to be inclusive of the rich diversity of queer youth texts and practices, it is important to recognize the impossibility of including all aspects of queer youth culture within a single book. Because of a lack of published accounts, there is pressure to try to represent the images, voices, and experiences of all those youth yet to be studied and validated. This is both the exciting part of gathering essays and a sign of its limitations. Instead of trying to encompass the breadth and depth of queer youth cultures, the book makes an effort to include essays that are innovative in their approaches, providing readers with an open-ended picture of dynamic cultural relations. At stake here is not an attempt to list, rank, and compare youth cultures but rather to provide textual openings into an emergent cultural field in which youth negotiate sexual, racial, class, and gender identities in specific and contextual ways. The very notion of “queer youth” is up for grabs as authors trouble binary assumptions and challenge readers to question and explore the complex desires and identifications of youth in culture today.

This book is divided into three parts to help organize the chapters and guide readers through a new body of empirically specific research and reflexive writing about queer youth. The first part, “Performative Queer Youth Cultures, Embodiments, and Communities,” focuses on those grassroots representations and subcultures through which youth fashion independent media and cultural meaning and social belonging. Performativity underscores an expansive range of utterances through which youth signify their desires and identifications by reiterating and transforming discursive conventions. The creative edges of queer drag, music, zines, and video performance are drawn out following the unique ways youth signify themselves in playful and politically insightful ways. Refusing to be passively subjected to mainstream discourses, queer youth engage as cultural producers, defining themselves through the process of creative dialogues. Calling attention to the predicaments of daily discrimination, harassment, and devaluation, these cultural enactments go much further than recounting youth suffering. Through the powerful statements of their songs, the humor of their visual cultures, and the intelligence of their writing, queer youth defy simplistic cat-

egories that frame them as isolated individuals at risk of victimization. Activating counter-publics, they share and circulate ideas about themselves in collectively meaningful and pleasurable ways. What stands out in these essays are reciprocal relations between researchers and youth cultures, positioning queer adult writers and youth participants as mutually aligned in an interpretive process attuned to the plural voices and embodied lives of queer youth. Authors refuse detached scientific methods, working from their passionate interests as queer scholars to explore artistic and experiential modes of representation by, for, and about queer youth, fostering intergenerational understandings.

The second part, “Desiring Youth in Un/Popular Cultures,” focuses on an expansion of mass media within which sexual minority youth are integrated at the level of explicit content and subtextual inscriptions. Paying close attention to the details of media texts, the chapters in this section analyze the images and narratives through which young same-sex desires and gender variations are conveyed within popular cultures. While the problem of recurrent ideological depictions of gay, lesbian, and transgender youth are highlighted by all the authors in this part, semiotic moments that destabilize heteronormative patterns are also unfolded within these essays, attending to subtle visual signs and storylines through which queer differences emerge. The cultural texts examined throughout this section are produced by adults within commercial media industries, yet it is not merely the preferred meanings of producers that are a site of analysis, but also the divergent ways queer youth imaginatively read and respond to them. Attending to the reception practices of queer youth opens up a dynamic field of meaning-making beyond prescribed dimensions of film, TV, and print media. Queer youth animate popular cultures in ways unanticipated within corporate agendas or academic critiques, spurring interpretive practices out of urgent and volatile desires to see, hear, and feel connected to alternative popular fictions. The very status of what is visible or invisible, which examples are regarded as “positive” or “negative,” remains unresolved and open for discussion, staying close to the ways queer youth are framed inside and outside media representations. Popular cultures are interpreted as ambivalent sites for queer youth provoking intense fascination and excitement as well as disturbing awareness of symbolic exclusion and violence. The essays tread carefully to respect this ambivalence without offering the readers easy or comforting answers.

The final part, “Transforming Political Activism,” concentrates attention onto the rich field of queer youth political participation. Examining

the political dimensions of cultural representations as well as more direct spheres of activism against corporate and state institutions, authors complicate the terms through which youth resist dominant regimes of power. As Cheryl Dobinson argues

GLB youth challenge social relations of domination in four key ways—first, in the transformation and re-creation of the activities of dominant culture into newly meaningful ones . . . second, through personalized efforts to educate others, represent GLB lives, or defend queer rights; third in the subversive continuation of activities which have been prohibited by authorities . . . and fourth, through involvement in new cultural practices. (72)

While Dobinson leaves out of consideration the specific status and relations of transgender youth, her list opens up a rich field of politically charged modes of resistance that include more conventional forms of protest along with informal and “unorganized” acts of rebellion. The chapters in this part carry these lines of thinking further, expanding terrains of political consciousness and planning to include intersecting relations between nationality, citizenship, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, ability, and age. In this sense queer youth politics become articulated criss-crossing multiple identities and social conditions of experience in the process of contesting systemic forces of control and regulation. Queer youth challenge simplistic, liberal political formulas, insisting upon the inseparability of bodily, symbolic, socioeconomic, educational, and governmental dimensions of domination. Adopting responses to diverse forms of power within their lives, queer youth utilize a range of strategic methods of resistance that span local acts including community-based performance and video art, street demonstrations, and grassroots organizing around specific issues to broader anticorporate coalition-building in a spirit of globalizing solidarity. The unique interventions of queer youth in the field of politics work to expand conceptions of young queer people in terms of active resistant subjects, while also transforming the very substance and form of youth politics to foreground gender and sexuality in the dynamic conjunction of multiple relations of power and privilege.

Although I have grouped chapters into distinct parts to help to organize the ideas and subjects of individual authors, there are many interconnections between parts and topics. It is my hope that readers make use of this text as a dynamic and flexible medium that encourages



questioning and dynamic ways of thinking within and across specific chapters. This book initiates a dialogue of many voices through which the very richness and variability of queer youth cultures become a starting point for a process of understanding across subjective, social, and political differences.

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