

Introduction

A Hazard of Queer Fortunes



FREE AT LAST? Virtually equal? In June and November 2003, two court cases seemed to promise a true sea change in the legal, and implicitly cultural, status of gays and lesbians: under *Lawrence et al. v. Texas* the U.S. Supreme Court declared antisodomy laws unconstitutional and gestured toward an imaginable rationale for legalizing same-sex marriage; in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples violated the principles of equal protection and due process. As of 2007, four states—Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New Hampshire—had legalized civil unions for gays and lesbians (in the first two cases only, civil union entails the same rights as marriage). Maryland and Colorado later enacted more limited domestic partnership laws. By 2007, California, the District of Columbia, Maine, Oregon, and Washington recognized domestic partner benefits, as did over half of the corporations in the Fortune 500 (such as General Electric, Time Warner, and Viacom).¹ Then in May 2008 California's Supreme Court effectively legalized gay marriage when it annulled its Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA—a state version of the 1996 federal DOMA permitting states, contrary to the Constitution's full faith and credit clause, not to honor marriage licenses from other states—implicitly, those held by same-sex couples). The Iowa Supreme Court took similar steps, declaring the state's DOMA unconstitutional in 2007 and legalizing same-sex marriage in 2009. In 2008, the Connecticut Supreme Court approved gay marriage; by June 2009, state legislatures in Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire had followed suit. The California decision soon encountered roadblocks. Voters approved Proposition 8, defining marriage heterosexually, in November 2008, and then in May 2009 the same state Supreme Court that had ruled in favor of gay marriage upheld the Prop 8's constitutionality. Meanwhile, New York governor David Paterson declared that New York would honor gay marriage licenses from

other states, thereby spurning DOMA and New York's own statute banning gay marriage. In April 2009 Paterson put forward legislation to legalize gay marriage. This embarrassment of victories, however, was met with a backlash that showed the battle for tolerance and equality was far from won. In the 2004 election alone, eleven states banned same-sex marriages, civil unions, and/or the granting of domestic partner benefits. By 2009, twelve states had banned the recognition of any such unions or marriage, twenty states had passed statutory DOMAs, and same-sex-marriage bans had been added to twenty-eight state constitutions.

Queer theorists and activists including Cindy Patton, Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, Amy Brandzel, and Teemu Ruskola argue that these so-called landmarks constitute, at best, a meager facsimile of progress and, at the worst, a distraction from neoliberal political, rhetorical, and economic strategies that discourage potentially transformative social alliances between disenfranchised groups while promoting "the upward redistribution of resources and the reproduction of stark patterns of inequality" (Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?* xiv). Ruskola worries that the antihomophobic intentions of the *Lawrence* court are hobbled by speaking "not of 'sodomy' but of 'intimacy'"—that is, by defending, or at least valorizing, gay love and intimacy only *within* committed, implicitly monogamous pairings (236). Much as Michael Warner does in his argument about the ideological and practical costs of fighting for gay marriage, Ruskola holds that corodoning off queer "sex that is not part of an on-going relationship" privatizes homosexuality in a way that not only defines the political potential of mobilizing around sex as "an ultimately political and public issue" but also presents a (to some) soothingly heteronormative version of homosexuality (239, 242). To say that sex and citizenship have nothing to do with one another may *prima facie* seem tolerant, but it's also a lie. *Lawrence et al. v. Texas* defines "responsibility" and, symbolically, citizenship precisely along sexual lines, "permit[ting] the exclusion of nonnormative sexualities from the 'world of public intimacy,' which may remain reserved for manifestations of normative heterosexuality" (242). More glaring, perhaps, are the actions and words of social conservatives and politicians, such as James Dobson, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, and former President George W. Bush, who, with either open loathing or practiced righteousness, state as a matter of fact that homosexuals are inferior, ungodly, and beyond the pale of civil dispensation. While it is to be expected that homophobic forces will be goaded into more strident and muscular efforts by antihomophobic advances in social attitudes and civil policy, many recent discussions and depictions of homosexuality seem to ignore the invigorated engines of homophobia in favor of rosier yet delusory vistas on both the (queer) present and what constitutes a desirable (queer) future. And, as Lisa Duggan argues in *The Twilight of Equality?* (2003), centrists and even progressives do as much damage, whether by failing to balk at overt homophobia or by remaining oblivious to homophobia's less flagrant, though equally poisonous, manifestations.

In the face of this admittedly, though not inherently discouraging, contradictory present, certain strains of gay thought—utopian, subversive, and assimilationist—persist in forms that may be alluring, yet are unproductive and potentially damaging. Whether encouraged by demonstrable improvements in social and, in some states, legal attitudes toward homosexuality or simply weary of conservative jeremiads, gay and lesbian Americans should stop to consider how queer space continues to be threatened or impinged on—and not just the queer spaces of the ghetto or gayborhood, but the rhetorical and ideological spaces that potentiate critical insight. Even an apparently harmless cultural episode such as the media apotheosis of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* has a worrisome undertow. Allowing both straights and gays to rejoice in a more tolerant present than that suffered by the film's protagonists, this sympathetic yet dour and tragic depiction of homosexuality is hailed as a sign that tolerance has arrived. Such encounters verge on the hazardous when they are unprotected, that is, when their anodyne character blurs one's awareness—or when one participates in them lacking, or seeking to escape, an awareness—of the boundaries that still bar queers in significant ways from political parity, from cultural presence, and from social personhood. These unmindful encounters also include the erosion, if not active erasure, of other, valuable kinds of boundaries, the differences that mark queers, their pleasures and ethoi, as diacritically yet not pejoratively other. (A promising project in this direction is *What Do Gay Men Want?* [2007], in which David Halperin calls gay men to reevaluate the subjective and political potential of abjection rather than seeking to escape abjection in obedience to psychoanalysis' lingering influence.) More worrisome yet is the extent to which moderate and liberal American queers, under the spell of unrealistic assessments of the communal and national present, and restrictively normative visions of those futures, might find themselves amenable to the sort of quiescence that they might otherwise resist—a submissiveness, advocated by gay conservatives, to a cultural script that fundamentally fails to countenance queers except as symbolic other, docile before roles and institutions for whom their existence doesn't seem to matter so much. The liberal trompe l'oeil of a future in which gayness no longer makes a difference not only forsakes much that's valuable about queerness, it also discomfitingly resembles the right-wing telos of a space where gayness doesn't matter, where it not only ceases to make a difference but where it also ceases to exist.³

Taking a popular/cultural studies approach, *Queer Externalities* examines American cultural representations from the current decade that illustrate either an inept appraisal or an insufficient awareness of the ideological, cultural, and sometimes very material muscle wielded—unevenly and incommensurately, from the political Right, Left, or center, from official versus popular discourse—by individuals, subcultures, and ideologies within the larger culture. In particular, I'm interested in looking at moments from the past several years in which the feeling among many queer and even some straight Americans—whether

expressed as a “postgay” mentality or a sense that acceptance and visibility have finally, or are very shortly about to, overcome the forces of homophobia—is revealed to be premature, if not chimerical. The cultural artifacts I’ve chosen to focus on highlight exemplary intersections of queer desire and activism, homophobia, and heteronormativity in American political life, mass media, and literature: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*; gay young adult novels by Alex Sanchez, David Levithan, and Bret Hartinger; *Brokeback Mountain*; the 2004 Bush versus Kerry presidential campaign; and the plethora of scandals surrounding outed gay Republicans including Mark Foley, Matt Sanchez, and Ted Haggard. In terms of theory, the book’s analyses are underpinned by the work (most recently) of queer theorists including Eve Sedgwick, Lee Edelman, Michael Warner, David Halperin, Anna Marie Smith, Cindy Patton, and Donald Hall, along with an investigation into how certain theoretical perspectives (such as cultural materialism) can heighten our understanding of both the hazardous and animating potential of queer representation. By parsing the multivalent ideological forces humming through these texts and cultural as well as political debates, I hope to show the extent to which the recent decade of scattered legal victories and largely positive gay media visibility has, for many, obscured the menacing antigay rhetoric that continues to structure not just public discourse in general but specific texts and statements in explicitly enunciated, glaring ways.

The book’s title, *Queer Externalities*, references a concept borrowed from economics—“externality.” In economic terms, an externality is a cost or benefit (respectively, a positive or a negative externality) that is borne not by the participants in an economic transaction but by some other party. Environmentally conscious policies are an example of a positive externality, profiting not any one company but benefiting society as a whole. Conversely, pollution is a negative externality, injuring the larger social welfare without incurring appreciable costs for the company creating the pollution.⁴

Before explaining how the concept of externalities can be applied to contemporary American cultural encounters and the hazards such encounters pose to queer Americans, a comment on my choice of terminology is in order. Borrowing a term from economics for queer analysis seems particularly apt at this historical moment, with the rise of (perceived) queer market niches over the past decade vis-à-vis corporate advertising as well as network and cable television programming. The ways in which corporate entities have been talking to gays has produced as axiomatic the belief that economic interpellation is synonymous with, or as good as, political and legal equality—or even with economic parity. Yet being addressed by a manufacturer hardly translates into the property or inheritance benefits accorded to heterosexual married couples. The equation may be fallacious, but it’s had a startling effect on the ways in which queers perceive their power: they have come to see themselves as powerful not because the government legitimizes or acknowledges them but because corporations do. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to adopt an economic term

to designate the phenomenon I'm attempting to address. Queers may think that they've arrived because they're being directly addressed and represented in ways measurably less phobic than in the past, but their assessment ignores the extent to which that interpellation is predicated on the whims of ratings, programming executives, marketing wonks, focus groups, and unrelated financial and market trends of corporate entities.

We'll have to wait and see what happens when queers who have felt legitimized by corporate sponsors and the entertainment industry, through shows like *Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk*, come to terms with the prospect of those shows no longer existing. When this happens, will these queers have (or feel they have) any power? Any recent progress, since the end of the two shows just mentioned, may have already diminished. Once no longer courted in prime time, will these queers and their supposed economic and political power remain? A 2007 survey of GLBT media representation on cable and network television by GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) suggests not. GLAAD's "Network Responsibility Index" bears out the dwindling prospects faced by GLBT audiences with the recent end of long-running gay shows. "Out of a total 679 series regular lead or supporting characters" in the 2006–2007 network season, there were "only nine (9) gay or lesbian [lead or supporting] characters—1.3%—appearing on eight (8) different scripted network programs" (GLAAD, "Where We Are" par. 1). While this is only a slight decrease in the ratio of queer to straight characters from the previous season (a nearly as bleak 1.4 percent), if one also includes recurring characters, the number of gay and lesbian characters is down from the previous season by nearly 30 percent on network shows and down 12 percent on cable programs. Network and cable programmers don't appear to be rushing in to fill that void. Regardless of future increases or decreases in these figures, it bears asking how queers can be said to substantively exist if they exist only as a market segment. Even if some companies continue to address gay audiences as they always have (Absolut Vodka, for instance, has long advertised in gay magazines such as the *Advocate*), that doesn't translate into political or social progress. Yet gay versions of ads (the 2007 Levi campaign that featured a young man eyeing someone in a phone booth: a man in one version, a woman in the other) run only on gay channels or in gay print venues, not on mainstream (i.e., straight) channels, even during a show such as *Project Runway*, which is popular with both queers and straights. When a gay ad runs next to a straight ad on a major network during prime time, for example, one can perhaps talk about more significant progress, that is, progress in which the economic is coterminous with the political, not its inadequate proxy.

To return to the concept of externalities, then, as they occur in queer cultural encounters. The following chapters look at queer externalities, both positive and negative: that is, cultural and ideological side effects generated both by queers and by those seeking to cloak, gloss over, or exterminate queerness. In political terms,

for example, homophobia yields a tremendous amount of cultural capital for the Republican Party, right-wing pundits, and some gay members of the mainstream media without cost to themselves (see Richard Goldstein, *The Attack Queers*, for an account of the latter). While this may not exactly seem to be a positive externality in the traditional sense (besides failing to accrue a greater social good, homophobia often seems to benefit its “producers”), most pontifications on the dangers posed by homosexuality are couched in terms of protecting the greater (implicitly, heterosexual) populace. From a less solipsistic viewpoint, of course, homophobia is a negative externality, incurring material as well as symbolic costs not only to queers (in the form of economic inequality, political marginalization, or physical violence) but also to those straights unwilling to inhabit a culture embittered with such rage and invective, to see their relatives, friends, and colleagues disenfranchised, sidelined, or attacked. Objectively assessed, homophobia is a negative externality, exacting ethical as well as tangible costs. Homophobia, of course, emanates from sources other than the most discernibly or flagrantly vitriolic, and part of my project is to elucidate the phobic undertow—the negative externality for queers—of seemingly gay-positive contexts and representations. From a variety of analytic edges (political, cultural, personal, institutional), the term “negative externality” begins to describe the kind of contradiction I’ve identified between perceived self-interest, or a fantasy of well-being, and collective hazard.

While attention will be given to exceptions (such as the activist camp of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which an invigorating queer difference is preserved, and queerness becomes a positive externality), for the most part this book highlights negative queer externalities, the largely unperceived costs for queers (and arguably, for society at large), produced by both homophobic and queer-positive representations of homosexuality. “Queer externality,” then, serves as a metaphor for social, political, and cultural behaviors and developments that, though arguably damaging to the larger culture, are potentially even more dangerous for queers. From increased queer visibility in successful mainstream entertainment (such as *Will & Grace* or *Brokeback Mountain*) to outings of conservative religious or political leaders who actively denounce and legally marginalize nonheterosexuals, queerness remains qualified, denied authenticity—as often by those who would redeem it as those seeking to repress or demonize it. Both affirmative and phobic representations meet increasingly jaded reactions, as if to suggest that enunciating queerness is neither as taboo nor as arduous as it once was. *Queer Externalities* analyzes cultural encounters that, despite the warmth with which many in straight and queer communities have welcomed or passively accepted them, are hazardous to the viability of queerness as a locus of personal, social, and political mobilization. Aside from their more obvious personal, immediate costs, these hazards constitute queer externalities by their diminution of sympathy for what gay conservatives and liberal allies alike disdain as outmoded rebellious marginalism.

As tempting as it might be for queers, given certain cultural and political advances, to dismiss separatism as gauche, counterproductive, or no longer necessary, doing so robs us of valuable queer strategies—via essentialism and identification—for resistance, sustenance, and, perhaps occasionally, transformation. Basking in the apparent mainstreaming of gayness means not only to misread the queer past, to mistake interpellation for acceptance, but to write off difference itself, to jettison a queer potentiality for *making* a difference. Rather than solely advocating either ghettoized isolationism or political apathy (many have read Lee Edelman's *No Future* as exhorting the latter), this book advocates the maintenance of an invigorating difference, a consciousness of the hazards of considering that queers have “arrived,” and that visibility, whether inspiring or shaming, brings its own hazards.

In *Gay TV and Straight America* (2006), Ron Becker searches for a correlation between the surge in gay- and lesbian-themed storylines on network television shows in the 1990s and the relatively high liberal support, during the same period, for gays and lesbians' effort to fight homophobia and obtain legal parity. Increased media visibility, obviously, does not entail positive representation only. With some exceptions, Becker finds the majority of gay network depictions of gays and lesbians during this period, while far from the wrecked, tortured souls of previous decades, to be reductive, marginal, and exoticizing. At the same time, many of the shows on which these characters appeared were tremendously popular, and networks consistently presented homosexual characters with a frequency (and often, an openness) absent from previous decades. Becker theorizes that “straight panic”—or heterosexual anxiety among liberals and moderates as well as conservatives—about an increasingly visible homosexual population offers the best explanation for the 1990s mixed political and entertainment messages about homosexuality:

In a climate where identity, history, and values based on the previously unchallenged assumptions of privileged groups were questioned, America was particularly sensitive to the tensions between the rights of a gay minority and the normative power of a straight majority. In fact, that struggle became one of the defining political and cultural issues of the decade. For a culture uneasy about the loss of moral consensus and struggling to deal with the proliferation of social identities, gays and lesbians' demands for social recognition and equal treatment pushed a lot of buttons. Like whites in a post-civil rights era, heterosexuals in the 1990s experienced something of an identity crisis. (31–32)

Becker names “two divergent symptoms of the era's straight panic”:

A conservative backlash worked hard to reestablish heterosexual privilege by justifying and reinscribing traditional moral hierarchies that

defined gays and lesbians as deviant. Meanwhile, gay-friendly liberals worked hard to accept and to adapt to the new sexual politics by trying to figure out how to be straight (especially a straight man) without the despised homosexual Other as one's point of reference. (32)

Together, these forces—venomous rejection on the one hand and squeamish tolerance on the other—generate a cultural ambivalence that tends to mute, if not countermand, the progress gays and lesbians seem to have made in wooing liberals and some moderates. Faced with homosexuality at nearly every turn, in public debates about marriage, domestic partnership benefits, adoption, and military service, straights in the 1990s got to feel good about being tolerant but also had their anxieties soothed by nonthreatening portrayals of the increasingly visible homosexual on television and in the public forum. In a similar vein, *Queer Externalities* traces, in the current decade, the degree to which both “symptoms” of this cultural ambivalence have become more pronounced. That intolerance, particularly from the New Right, has grown more vehement may not be surprising. Then again, it may be—given the general equanimity and optimism prevailing among many queers and their sympathizers. Weary of Republican and social conservative hate-mongering, and assuming that few rational people are still fooled by their sophistry and brimstone, queer Americans risk being too easily wooed by apparent harbingers of tolerance and equality. To find undue solace in an artifact of queer “arrival” (*Brokeback Mountain*) or an episode of conservative chagrin (the exposure of Mark Foley and the attendant Republican cover-up) may numb the anxieties generated by stepped-up conservative efforts to erase advances toward gay and lesbian parity—but they hardly counteract them. What the present book explores is (1) the homophobia and heteronormativity that fund, subtend, and structure American cultural discourse even when a particular queer representation seems progressive and conscientiously antihomophobic, and (2) the resultant care one must take to differentiate hazardous moments that imperil queer presence from sustaining moments that defilade queers’ potential for participation, critical perspective, and, if only in exiguous or local ways, cultural transformation.



Speaking of queers or queer Americans is certain to raise political and intellectual concerns, inasmuch as such terms seem to regard nonheterosexuals—or, more finitely, gays and lesbians—as homogeneous populations, to reify homosexuality and thereby further shore up the already rigid edges of the homo/hetero paradigm. It may be of little comfort that the term’s use is antihomophobic (as in queer activism) rather than homophobic (as in the myth of homosexual recruitment). Other readers may demur from my often interchangeable use of “queer” and “gay and lesbian,” or from what may seem a reflexive reference to gays and lesbians when the discussions here focus almost exclusively on representations and

encounters of male homosexuality. Rather than a semantic imprecision, speaking in the same breath of “gay” and “queer” is meant to gesture toward those ways in which gay experience is representative, though not exclusively so, of queerness in the cultural imagination. Social and religious conservatives are not exactly fond of lesbians, but it’s the male homosexual that most haunts and fuels their ethos. Conversely, abjection of the queer in America feeds back into and shapes individual and communal gay self-understanding. Likewise, my terminology is not meant to insist that all gays and lesbians must identify as queer. The ranks of the queer—those who find themselves at odds with one or more norms—include more than those commonly grouped together as the GLBT community. However, contrary to many queer theorists (including Michael Warner, Donald Hall, and David Halperin—with whom I agree on much else), I would argue that sexual norms must be prominent, if not primary, among the norms queers find themselves at odds with. While “queer” is an ideologically flexible category, and while regarding it as such is strategic in terms of coalition building and cultural dialogue, expanding “queer”—queering “queer”—too far weakens the rationale of the category itself (no matter how loose), erodes the ideological cohesiveness of a positionality whose validity lies in its resistance to “regimes of the normal” (Warner, Introduction xxvi). David Halperin puts it in more accommodating terms still: “queer acquires its meaning from its relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*” (*Saint Foucault* 62). (For a yet more expansive account, see Carla Freccero 17–20, 29–30.) If queer includes anyone who falls athwart some norm, then doesn’t queer risk becoming a regime in itself? Gays, lesbians, and even queers are disparate groups, each of which comprises a broad swath of possibilities and cross-identifications, and the present discussion does not mean to equate the full spectrum of possibilities within any of these parameters of experience with another. *Queer Externalities* does not deal extensively with the intersections of queer studies with, for example, gender or ethnic studies. Hiram Perez and Judith Halberstam, among others, have articulated queer studies’ historical disconnect from concerns of race and gender and the need, from multiple angles, to think through more carefully such connections, variances, and possibilities for insight and coalition (Perez “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too”; Halberstam “Shame and White Gay Masculinity”). While some might object that the following chapters are “dominated by . . . discussing issues of interest to other white gay men,” my project does not pretend to address every issue facing the heterogeneous group loosely referred to as “the gay and lesbian community” (Halberstam, “Shame” 220). My interest lies, rather, in addressing the *homogeneous*, regulatory terms by which queers are interpellated by American culture—terms that are necessarily insufficient, yes, but whose potency to shape homophobic political policy and cultural rhetoric is undeniable. Although rejected by some queer individuals as essentialist and therefore hopelessly inimical to projects of social change—a charge I will return to shortly—these are the same

terms that, for their pragmatically motive as well as their curative properties, queers must retain, must engage with without necessarily being globally confined to, if they hope to interact significantly, transformatively, with present-day American political and cultural life.

Up to a point, the cultural conditions represented in and through these texts may stand in for common risks or struggles of queers of various stripes. My concern is predominantly with gay texts and contexts, that is, with representations and interpellations of male homosexuality. Although the ambit of almost any inquiry is restricted in some way, and although an apologia for exclusions has become pro forma, the statement is worth reiterating. The particular inflections and exigencies of lesbian experience are bound to differ in significant ways from those of gay men's lives, and may produce sharply divergent insights and strategies for survival and critique. Yet insofar as (heteronormative) American culture conceives of gays and lesbians, rhetorically, as a single entity—whether corrosive, noble, or merely eccentric—gay men and women share certain political goals vis-à-vis homophobia, heterosexism, and normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. *Queer Externalities* does not aim for truths to be gained from analyzing the antilesbian texture of recent political and literary discourse but rather those truths common to gays and lesbians as targeted populations, caught together in the crosshairs of the larger culture's organizing mythos.

Given that it's become almost de rigueur to eschew essentialisms and identities as restricting and debilitating, my position is bound to seem heteroclit, if not perversely unfashionable. And it is—but not simply for the sake of aberrance or perversity. (It should be noted that essentialism can be understood in more than one sense; the sense in which I'm using it does not extend to arguments such as John Boswell's regarding the existence of homosexuality throughout human history.) Essentialism has taken quite a few hits over the past three decades as feminist, queer, and race studies have problematized—and rightly so—the reductive limits of understanding identity to be elemental or inherent. Gays and lesbians have had reason to be ambivalent about essentialist explanations of sexuality—particularly scientific ones. Simon LeVay's 1991 study of hypothalamic size in gay and straight men promised to reveal what the media dubbed the "gay brain," thereby establishing a biological basis for explaining homosexuality. LeVay's study was widely discredited for its small sample size and LeVay's questionable interpretation of the evidence, yet the idea that such evidence might someday be discovered, in the brain or elsewhere, was both exciting and unsettling. Proof of sexuality's essentialism would refute the phobic myth that homosexuality is a choice and therefore constitutes an irrefutable claim for gay and lesbian rights; indeed, the notional inheritance of a person's sexuality has been the cornerstone of the modern gay and lesbian arguments against homophobic violence and legal discrimination. The very same evidence, however, conjures the murderous specter of eugenic detection and elimination. All that being said, however, there are a number of reasons not to write off essentialism so hastily. For one, as Diana Fuss asserts at the outset of *Essentially*

Speaking (1989), “The bar between essentialism and constructionism is by no means as solid and unassailable as advocates of both sides assume it to be” (xii). While Fuss’s insistence that “an essentialist theory of identity (which sutures over the dislocating operations of the psyche) is ultimately *not* a secure foundation for politics” sets her argument apart from mine in distinctive ways, it’s my position that the “steady and localizable” character of “political work” can be, as Fuss believes, compatible with identity’s inherent “internal disorder” and instability (105). In fact, identity’s—and indeed, representation’s—capacity for fragmentation permits both critiques of homophobic rhetoric and strategic deformations of heteronormativity, sustaining queers’ capacity for survival as well as intervention. Fuss herself admits as much:

There is an important distinction to be made between “deploying” or “activating” essentialism and “falling into” or “lapsing into” essentialism. “Falling into” or “lapsing into” implies that essentialism is inherently reactionary—inevitably or inescapably a problem or a mistake. “Deploying” or “activating,” on the other hand, implies that essentialism may have some strategic or interventionary value. . . . [T]he political investments of the sign “essence” are predicated on the subject’s complex positioning in a particular social field and . . . the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produced it. (20)

Though ultimately my investment in the political is material in a way that Fuss might reject as “reifying,” the following discussions pay sufficient attention, I hope, to “shifting and determinative discursive” status of queerness in American culture to honor the “differences and inconsistencies in the production of stable political subjects” (106, 104). (For previous attempts to strike a balance between deconstructed and strategically essentialist senses of “queer,” see Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 229; and Spivak and Rooney.)

If my position appears retrograde to some, it will perhaps prove refreshing to others. Given the dead end to which mainstream, assimilationist, single-issue gay and lesbian politics has led us, there’s value to be gained from returning to past insights—like the importance of remaining critically aware of American culture’s ultimately heteronormative agenda—insights mainstream gay and straight culture have rejected as backward, polemical, impolite. *Queer Externalities* issues from a controversial yet frank conviction that visible and distinct gay and lesbian communities and identities are not impediments to our progress, relics of our political past. Choosing to identify as gay or to participate in a gay community is a matter of individual taste. Many gay men vehemently insist that they are “not into the gay scene,” meaning, usually, that they do not frequent or do not feel comfortable in gay neighborhoods or bars—that is, publicly gay places. This is not to say that such a position is inherently heteronormative, unexamined, or co-opted. “Gay” is ultimately a space, a sheath, and I can put it

on or not. Regardless of my willed affiliation, however, the larger culture still considers me gay. I may choose not to go to gay bars, circuit parties, or pride marches, but I still have sex with men. In these terms at least, being gay can never be apolitical. Without identifying as gay, I am still tarred with the same homophobic brush—even if being closeted or refusing to call myself gay exempts me from homophobia's more direct blows.⁵ And media visibility, mixed legal gains, and a relative increase in tolerance (toward the idea of gay and lesbian equality) in no way guarantee the permanence of a gay and lesbian presence in the public sphere, nor do these ensure against the attrition of our presence or the reversal of those developments. Anna Marie Smith says as much in *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality* (1994), an analysis of homophobic and racist public policy and discourse in Britain from 1968 to 1990:

What the left often fails to recognize is that homosexual, gay and lesbian identities cannot be taken for granted, for, as historical constructs, they developed only in certain contexts, and will disappear in other contexts. It is true that many lesbian and gay activists remain suspicious about any attempts to enforce the normalization of gay and lesbian; they, like Foucault are proponents of endlessly creative sexual movements which would celebrate the multiplication of non-authoritarian differences. However, there is a quite a difference between, on the one hand, the weakening of lesbian and gay identities and their displacement with new identities through our own creative practices, and, on the other hand, the marginalization of our political movements and the destruction of our entire culture by homophobic forces. Although we need to be on our guard against the rigidity of identity games, this does not mean that we ought to abandon our efforts to consolidate our fragile gains in the face of tremendous authoritarian bigotry. Again, we can only engage in the exploration of creative identity games once we have fortified enclosures against homophobic forces through defensive identity games. (237)

I am somewhat more cautious than Smith about the power of isolated acts in altering paradigms of sexuality, at least telically or in the short run: such transformations, as David Halperin argues in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, seem to require an accrual of time and subversive play beyond the reaches of the individual and the horizon of the present. What's more, exerting pressure on identity and roles in an attempt to reconstruct them or shift an entire paradigm (although this may not be what Smith means) seems like so much energy wasted, energy that might be channeled more productively toward grappling for agency in the polity that recognizes gays and lesbians by those identities. I concur with Smith on the dire need and the protective as well as productive ("creative") utility of "fortified enclosures" and "defensive identity games."

Shying away from the notions of identity and essentialism as entirely outmoded or inhibitive vehicles for queer life and mobilization is an injudicious move away from a paradigm that permits play and offers real protections that, as this book substantiates, are still sorely needed in a culture where homophobia is not only pervasive but escalating in putatively liberal or neutral contexts, and to lessening public objection. (In “Why Did Armeý Apologize?: Hegemony, Homophobia, and the Religious Right?” Smith contends that the New Right has made homophobia more palatable, that is, less obviously offensive by disguising it as an objection to “special rights,” a crusade against the inequality embodied, supposedly, by gay antidiscrimination laws. Smith’s adept analysis of homophobia’s greater infiltration of the public sphere through right-wing rhetoric will be returned to in chapter 2.) In *New Right Discourse*, Smith trenchantly observes that conservative objections to the promotion of homosexuality—by its sheer visibility, usually—are so vehement precisely because queer identity, whether we conceive it as concretizing, unstable, or somewhere in between, *is* politically effective. It might seem counterintuitive, but antigay conservatives are right on one count: “[H]omosexuality survives only to the extent that it is promoted. . . . [L]esbian and gay identities . . . profoundly depend upon political intervention, and . . . if homosexuality were politicized, it could indeed have a tremendous subversive effect on the ‘normal’” (Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse* 238). Visibility, identification, and the sort of adulterated essentialism recommended by *Queer Externalities* are crucial to queer survival and—just perhaps—instrumental to queering, or transforming, the social.

One need not be so apologetic about recommending essentialism, however, for the argument has been made before—though perhaps forgotten—that essentialism is immanently adulterated. To regard identity, by contrast, as unilaterally essentialist, hierarchical, or oppressive, is, according to Cindy Patton, to willfully misunderstand the nature of identity—that is, to forget that identity is not purely an intellectual concept but one that operates also in the real world and therefore, whatever else it is, must on some level be understood materially. Whatever identity seems capable of being, it must also be doable. And it is, as gays and lesbians know from their own lived experience. In “Tremble, Hetero Swine!” (1993), Patton cautions queers against the then-fashionable flight from essentialism by insisting that holding onto differences can be essentializing in one sense but thoroughly pragmatic in another. Queer theory, inspired by poststructuralism and social constructionism, sought the promise of escape from the oppressive history and limitations of Western (white, male) subjectivity by alleging that the true nature of identity—constructed, unstable, contingent—undermined all modes of identification as unsound, backward, essentialist. Essentialism became what institutions do to individuals, an imposed, policing mechanism. And it’s not that identities can’t be that. It’s just that their other characteristics—motility, agency—are being shortchanged. Patton compellingly asserts:

A . . . fundamental principle of identity discourse seems to have been lost from view in the debate about postmodernism and postidentity politics. Implicit in the differing modes of identity construction are claims about political formation, about forms of governmentality, about the difference between modernity and postmodernity. To the extent that groups like ACT UP or Queer Nation have, largely due to their sophisticated use of cynical media practices, been associated with postmodernism, other forms of gay political labor have implicitly been identified as “bad old modernist.” But more than standing for a discovery of the self, identities suture those who take them up to specific moral duties. Identities carry with them a requirement to act, which is felt as “what a person like me does.” There is a pragmatic, temporal aspect to identities, whether we believe in them or not. The requirement to *act* implicit even in transient identities means that those who inhabit them feel they must do something and do it now. This produces a kind of closure, but that does not mean that identities are or become effectively essential: the stabilization of identities appears to be ineluctably essentialist only when we treat them in the realm of the imaginary, with its apparent promise of infinite possibilities for performance and reperformance. Instead, I propose . . . that we treat identities as a series of rhetorical closures linked with practical strategies, implicit or consciously defined, alliances and realliances that in turn affect the whole systems for staging political claims. (147)

Not all identity constructions are essentialist all of the time. Not all essentialisms are bad. More exactly, essentialism is not what we have made it out to be: it is not, as a matter of course, exclusive of the pragmatic, the incidental. What makes the situation more dire—and the reappraisal of essentialism more vital—is that homophobic institutions and individuals engage with essentialist identity constructs. And so it is there, through such modalities, that antihomophobic work—personal, cultural, political work—must, on some level, be undertaken. In Patton’s words, “Quotidian uses of identities must be understood in the context of a struggle to control the general rules of identity construction. The plainly essentializing logics within this field must be viewed as options deployed in a deadly game of queer survival, not as ‘foundations’ for ‘identity’” (167). Similarly helpful is Patton’s use of the term “deontic closures” to specify those “performative and pragmatic dimensions” of identity (as opposed to its “imaginary dimensions” as conjured by the specter of “essentialism”), to underscore the way in which gay and lesbian identities “carry with them a requirement to act.” But the implication of Patton’s argument is broader, it seems. Identities not only “suture those who take them up to specific moral duties” (calling out phobic exclusions in social discourse, for example); they also present a moral obligation, which can be taken on or rebuffed, to those outside the “rhetorical closures” of one’s identity position. These

obligations, or opportunities, exist then on both sides, potentiating “alliances and realliances,” permitting both the polemical and the affiliative moves integral to “staging political claims.” Contrary to Eve Sedgwick’s concern, in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Axiom 4), over the punitive repercussions of essentialist (as well as constructionist) theories of homosexuality, Patton suggests that that tension—the resonance of identity both as debated and as lived—is in fact the energizing contradiction of queerness. And it’s a contradiction as capable of spurring social change as of sheltering embattled lives, as given to crossing boundaries as to fortifying them. Furthermore, when Patton says that identity discourse “produces a kind of closure,” we might reasonably extend this to mean literal as well as rhetorical enclosures. The “gay community”—as a bloc and as a geographical space, as a gayborhood—has permeable but remnant boundaries. Being true to the complexities of human experience (rather than merely being sloppy), one can regard “gay” as both internal and external to “queer,” “queer” as simultaneously a labile anticategory, slur, and insignia.

Refusals to queer identification can be mild, made in the name of privacy or as a statement against “labels.” British pop musician Mika “actively markets himself to a gay audience” yet is leery of “acknowledg[ing] his own sexuality” (Juergens, “Mika: Why Don’t the Gays Love Him?” par. 1). Known for his “Freddie Mercury falsetto . . . and defiantly flamboyant posturing,” Mika appeared on the July 2007 cover (ironically) of *Out* magazine, but not to out himself (par. 1). Like the caption for the cover photo (“Mika: Gay/Post-Gay/Not Gay?”), Mika’s responses to questions about his sexuality were evasive: “Anybody can label me, but I’m not willing to label myself. . . . Anybody who says that I don’t talk about sexuality or that I don’t politically sexualize my music because of taboos, because of being afraid of [not] selling records, is completely wrong. . . . Why pigeonhole myself like that? Will it change? Possibly” (qtd. in Hilton pars. 3, 5, 7). Like characters Molly Bolt and Jason Carillo (from *Rubyfruit Jungle* and the *Rainbow Boys* novels), Mika squirms at the apparent imprisonment of labels. But the complaint about being “pigeonhole[d]” is rarely the principled stand it facetiously pretends to be. What principle that might be, in any case, is unclear; one seldom hears threnodies about the personality-immuring effect of other identifiers (for example, “pro-choice,” “emo,” or “evangelical”), or at least not as loudly. It’s not so much the case that Mika doesn’t like labels. The label he doesn’t like is “gay.” Mika himself acknowledges that, in the wake of Elton John and George Michael, being an openly gay musician is hardly the automatic career killer it was once feared to be.⁶ Simply put, in the words of gay blogger Brian Juergens,

[t]he story here is that we have a gay-vague celebrity *aggressively* marketing himself to us while telling us that we are part of a society with whom he would not want to identify. He constantly refers to not wanting to be “labeled,” which is beyond offensive to those of us who don’t

see sexuality as a label, but rather a fundamental part of who we are. Does it define us? No—not any more than “tall,” “Hispanic,” “enthusiastic,” or “big-boned” would. (“Mika: In Which We Decline” par. 2)

In response to Mika’s pejorative association of “being labeled” with homosexuality, Juergens adds, “I wasn’t aware that your sexuality was something that you could (or would want to) ‘move past’” (“Mika: ‘Post-Gay’” par. 7). While it’s true that “gay” is not inherently limiting, unlike the other nonlimiting descriptors Juergens uses above, it constitutes a more integral part of gay experience, if only as a result of the homo/hetero paradigm that defines all of us, especially gays and lesbians, by our sexuality. One doesn’t have to be “into the gay scene,” but one needs to be allied to it. It’s ethically incumbent on queers to acknowledge that affiliation. Not to do so—by reticence or by default—is collaborationist.

Rejections of gay identity also come in more clamorous, less evasive forms. Jack Malebranche’s *Androphilia: A Manifesto: Rejecting the Gay Identity, Reclaiming Masculinity* (2006) presents itself as a “book for men who love men but are sick to death of the gay community” (x). Malebranche claims to speak on behalf of “men who rarely have their feelings about homosexuality and gay culture in print,” a silent majority of everyday Joes who, stereotypically masculine in almost every way, just happen to be sexually attracted to men:

Gays would like to believe that those same-sex-inclined men who want little or nothing to do with the gay community or who disagree with gay ideology are a few isolated self-hating Roy Cohns. I believe they are legion. And I don’t think most of them hate themselves or hate being attracted to men. But because these men are busy living their lives without wrapping themselves in their sexual identity, because they are busy simply *being men*, they go unnoticed. (x, xi)

Claiming to be marginalized by those who themselves are marginalized, Malebranche ignores the existence in gay communities of men who belie his false, blunt dichotomy between “living one’s [implicitly normal] life” and being gay—men who do not confine themselves to a gay ghetto, or for whom being gay doesn’t necessarily (or only) mean riding on a pride float in nothing but short shorts and leather boots. Furthermore, Malebranche’s own screed against gay identity disregards the import of his own trajectory into and then out of the gay community:

While I’ve always been critical of the gay hive mind, I haven’t always been the outsider I am now. I spent a significant portion of my life traveling in gay circles, hanging out in bars and gossiping with queens. In the early 1990s, I was a go-go dancer in New York City’s club kid scene. I ran around in elaborate costumes and makeup. I’ve shaved my

body, colored my hair, and pierced my eyebrow. I've been a fashion fag and an enthusiastic pop-culture addict. I've challenged gender constructs. I've done drag. I've talked the talk and fagged out with the best of them. I've been to backrooms, leather clubs, bear bars, hipster hang-outs and circuit parties. I even marched in a gay pride parade once. I know the gay community from inside out. . . . I know what the gay lifestyle has to offer.

. . . Eventually, I realized that while I was experiencing many things in the gay world, I was shutting out so much more, I was living in a gay bubble, dissociated from nongay men, cut off from a part of myself that was distinctly, unmistakably male.

. . . Men who love men have a place in the world beyond the gay world; they have a place in the world of men. (xi–xii)⁷

Is there something about certain sex-related professions that turns its gay practitioners into conservatives, if not career homophobes? Malebranche was a go-go boy. Jeff Gannon, who ran a partisan Republican Web site and regularly attended White House press conferences (and perhaps performed other services while there), was an escort. Matt Sanchez, darling of the Right's campaign against liberal bias in higher education, was formerly a gay porn star. (Gannon and Sanchez are discussed in chapters 2 and 5, respectively.) If not explicitly Republican, Malebranche has made the same arc, from gay to "androphile" (read: "postgay"?), from sex worker to a conservative (in matters of gender at least). Equally striking, and more immediately relevant, is his failure to countenance other ways of being gay, almost a refusal to conceive of club queens and "normal" same-sex-oriented men as possibly ever cohabiting the same culture or subculture, of being capable of moving between subcultures, or of inhabiting both in turn. For Malebranche, to walk into a gay bar is to be trapped in a "bubble," wholly "dissociated" from straight men, from masculinity, unless one is strong enough to go hyperbutch as he did and cross back over to Jordan's manly side. Despite the existence of gayborhoods, gay and lesbian bookstores, bars, and community centers, such spaces are open to and often frequented by straights as well as queers. Gay bathhouses and adult bookstore backrooms are more restricted, but on the basis of gender; their clientele include gay as well as bisexual (and some straight) men. All of these establishments still exist within larger heterosexual spaces; gay men must move through and inhabit straight spaces every day; we live there. As a character from Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* says, "[S]traight people. . . . There's too goddamn many of them. I was in the bank yesterday. They were everywhere. Writing checks, making deposits. Two of them were applying for a mortgage. It was disgusting. They're taking over. No one wants to talk about it but it's true" (58). It's facile to conceive of gay experience as hermetically sealed off from the larger culture. Yet this is the scenario—and the dichotomous set of extremes—conceived of

both by the larger culture and, as Malebranche's diatribe attests, by some gay men themselves. Malebranche is right on one point: association with gays or a gay subculture is entirely a matter of individual choice. It's also a matter of opportunity and access. One can be gay and associate with few to no straight men, or with almost exclusively straight men. But the insistence of *Queer Externalities* is that the option of a largely gay space is worth preserving, whether or not one lives in a gayborhood, frequents gay bars, or has many gay friends. Association is a choice, but affiliation should not be. Malebranche may express himself more bluntly than Mika, but the sentiment is at base no different. Distaste for homogeneity stems from, or translates into, an antipathy for homosexuality. It amounts to the same in the end.

As much as it might rile those like Malebranche, the perceived (and, on some level, actual) militancy of a project such as mine is inevitable in the current climate. Neither is it contrived. And while ghettoized isolationism without an ameliorating political, social interestedness seems misled, ghettos themselves are not the shallow, alienating oubliettes that apostles of the "post-gay" movement would have us believe (as if American culture in general were not as capable as gay subculture of being shallow or alienating). This is hardly to say that gays or lesbians who don't live in or near urban areas with a visible and significant queer population are somehow inauthentically queer. But gayborhoods—indeed, any safe, reserved real or rhetorical space for queers—are valid and necessary, as some minimal space cleared, even if not entirely or permanently, of the overwhelming ubiquity and righteousness of straightness. A historically semipermeable neighborhood, the gay ghetto stands as and stands in for the conscious attempt to regulate intercultural transactions, to monitor, perhaps deflect or queer, the flow and impact of heteronormatively vectored energies. It's in this way that my argument is likely to seem perverse, for recommending the maintenance and intermittent embrace of what many queers view as a liability, a relic of a radical past. Whether taken literally (visiting a gay ghetto) or figuratively (holding open some space for abstention or resistance), the gay ghetto is valuable for what it keeps in and out on both sides. Likewise, some queer externalities may yield simultaneously negative and positive dimensions. The gayborhood needn't (and probably shouldn't or can't) circumscribe one's sociocultural environs, account for one's only positioning. But it should be acknowledged for its utilities, relied on periodically for its saving capabilities and ludic allowance.



It's not my intent to advocate what David Van Leer calls a strict margin/center dichotomy in reference to queers and straights, or heteronormative culture and queer subcultures. Here I concur with Van Leer's comment in *The Queening of America*: "Whatever the perks of empowerment, I doubt that anyone aspires to occupy 'the center' as such or that 'the margins' are where

minorities feel themselves to live—either as exiles or as cultural insurrectionists. And no critique of the inside/outside dichotomy admits the extent to which persons, indifferent to referentiality, often experience their position simply as ‘here’” (9). As nonrepresentative of most queer (and nonqueer) persons’ lives as dichotomous models (margin/center, homo/hetero) may be, they do hold powerful attractions: the lure of making it from one side to the other and the lure of thinking that one might abolish the paradigm altogether. While they may not (perceptibly) structure one’s everyday experience, the representational plinth is there, an ideological force that exists regardless of one’s attempts to disavow it.

Weighing in on the constructionism/essentialism debate in order to declare one’s fealty to one side or the other (if not both) has become de rigueur for discussions in queer studies—and for good reason. Queer theory has illuminated the historical embeddedness of sexual identity: rather than a universal, transhistorical category, what we usually mean when we refer to homosexuality refers not so much to certain behaviors and desires but to an *alignment* of behaviors and desires particular to Western culture from the mid-nineteenth-century onward.⁸ On the other hand, the modern gay and lesbian movement’s arguments against discrimination, the activist “recovery” of a gay past (Plato, Michelangelo, etc.), and most gays and lesbians’ senses of their own sexuality all rest on a conviction that sexual identity is not a choice but an inborn part of one’s person, like eye or skin color—a rationale that constructionism would seem to undermine. Eve Sedgwick famously tried to bracket this impasse in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (suggesting “minoritizing” and “universalizing” as terms with less baggage as homophobic cudgels than constructionism and essentialism). However, David Halperin has argued the inescapability and continued relevance of the constructionist/essentialist model—with a slight yet convincing alteration. In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*—a seminal work in queer theory on the order of Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet*—Halperin proffers a “rehabilitated constructionist approach”: “readily acknowledging the existence of transhistorical continuities, reintegrating them into the frame of the analysis, and reinterpreting their significance within a genealogical [that is, historicized] understanding of the emergence of (homo)sexuality itself. A constructionist history of homosexuality . . . can easily accommodate such continuities. . . .” (106). Halperin’s innovation in the long tug-of-war between constructionists and essentialists is to delineate the shifting alignments of same-sex desires, acts, and gender behavior—the “long historical process of accumulation, accretion, and overlay”—that constitute “sexuality” uniquely at different periods in history.⁹ My reading of Halperin, a reading that informs much of *Queer Externalities*, is that sexuality may be thought of as historically constructed, but that within that, our range of movement—the options for willed reconfiguration of elements that make up those categories—is limited. Historically embedded and culturally constructed, sexual identity is essential within a paradigmatic moment (such as our present homo/hetero paradigm)—changeable, but not by individual will or in a visible

way in any single moment or series of moments. As with the evolutionary theory of punctuated equilibrium, the transformation or *reconstruction* of sexualities is a slow, accretive, and not (entirely) conscious or intentional process.

That's not to say that revision is impossible.¹⁰ Advocating the preservation of certain boundaries, even permeable ones, is bound to strike some as backwardly essentialist. Shoring up the notion of a gay ghetto, rhetorical or real, may seem counter to current activist impulses. A position like mine may also come under philosophical scrutiny. In *Bodies That Matter*, for example, Judith Butler (most famous for *Gender Trouble* and her theory of gender performance/subversion) voices concern over the essentializing tendency of gay and lesbian identity politics. "[A]ttribut[ing] a false unity to heterosexuality," a relational understanding of homosexuality—as *not* heterosexuality—"paradoxically . . . weaken[s] . . . the very constituency [gay or lesbian identity] is meant to unite" (113). Inasmuch as gay and lesbian identities can be seen, far from problematizing heterosexuality, as confirming the larger framework (homo/hetero) to the exclusion of other positions (not limited to bisexuality), it is certainly worthwhile to think through

the potential cruelties that follow from an intensification of identification that cannot afford to acknowledge the exclusion on which it is dependent, exclusions that must be refused, identifications that must remain as refuse, as abjected, in order for that intensified identification to exist. This is an order of refusal which not only culminates in the rigid occupation of exclusionary identities, but which tends to enforce that exclusionary principle on whomever is seen to deviate from those positions as well. (116)

Butler cautions against the tendency, under the homo/hetero paradigm, to "disavow a constitutive relationship to heterosexuality" in order to escape heteronormativity's association of homosexuality and abjection," a disavowal "enacted as a political necessity to *specify* gay and lesbian identity over and against its ostensible opposite, heterosexuality" (113). If anything, the following chapters show the obduracy with which queers are both definitionally bound to and abjected by the stipulations of heteronormativity. Blindly embracing or simply misreading negative queer externalities, instead of "disavowing" the double bind between homosexuality and heterosexuality, at once romanticizes that bond and fantasizes that the boundary differentiating gay from straight can be erased or is well on its way to being so. In my reading, contemporary queer culture, far from renouncing a constitutive relationship with heterosexuality, sometimes seems hazardously enthralled by its fundamentally homophobic totems.

It seems feasible (and advisable) to be sensitive to the historical contingency and adverse consequences of certain models of identity formation, even to work queerly toward a more equitable construction, and yet at the same time value the appreciable auspices and pragmatic sense of an essentialist model. There's a more