

**"Straight People Are Looking at You:" Heterosexual Privilege and Homonormativity in
American Visual Texts**

by

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Abstract

My dissertation deals with the topic of representations of gay men in such American popular texts as film, television, and mainstream theatre. I advance the argument that while the 2000s have seen a dramatic rise in the number of gay people, primarily white men, depicted in these texts, this growth has had many consequences that actually serve the interests of the heterosexual majority far more than the gay audiences that consume these texts. Gay men in popular film, television and drama are often presented either as saints, who either die or suffer profoundly in order to teach the straight audiences lessons, or as victims that need to be saved from their (often gay) oppressors. Texts that include these portrayals advocate not acceptance of sexual diversity, but tolerance, which reinforces inequality rather than challenging it. While these representations reflect straight creators and audiences' desire to both disavow and cling to the privileges they enjoy at the expense of gay people, they are also the result of gay creators and audience's insistence on "positive representations." I argue that these representations are part of the political stance theorist Lisa Duggan calls the "new homonormativity," which homogenizes gay people by shoring up the mainstream values of monogamous marriage, child-rearing, and consumerism. The spokespersons for this view are primarily white, male, and middle class, and show little interest in the ways in which gay identity intersects with race, gender, and class. Many queer theorists have recently argued in favor of a more intersectional approach to gay politics and theory that considers how all of these subject positions impact each other, and my methodology is strongly shaped by this

approach. While most of the texts I consider are mainstream and strictly conform to the new homonormativity, I also examine texts from the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s that stressed both diversity and resistance to the limitations posed by positive representations to suggest a more progressive direction for current mainstream representations. In my reading of these texts, I argue that mainstream texts cannot meaningfully advocate for equality between gays and straights until gays are represented with the same racial, political, and ideological diversity as their straight counterparts.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter One	25
Chapter Two	65
Chapter Three	94
Chapter Four	125
Conclusion	162
References	185

Introduction "Straight People are Looking at You"

My project enters three separate and yet intimately connected fields of study: the representation of gay men in mainstream texts, the politics of the gay and lesbian movement, and queer theory. I argue that in spite of tremendous growth in the number of gay characters in mainstream films, on television, and in major theatrical productions, there has been little progress in representing the diversity and complexity of gay people's lives. This is largely due to the assimilationist politics of many of the gay creators who produce these texts, part of which includes an anxious desire to please mainstream audiences by shoring up dominant values that privilege heterosexuals, whites, and men. In advancing my critique, I draw on the work of queer theorists, critical race theorists, and popular culture critics to demonstrate the need for a more intersectional approach to representation that includes not only more attention to race and class but to a variety of political views as well.

One text that raises the issue of intersectionality is a 2009 performance at Washington D.C.'s Warner Theatre by well-known black lesbian comedienne Wanda Sykes. In "I'ma Be Me," Sykes draws satiric humor from the pressure placed on black Americans by white culture to be "dignified." She describes scenes from her childhood in which her mother pressured her to be very self-conscious about her behavior in public under the admonition that "white people are looking at you." Sykes confesses that she is still aware of being the object of a white gaze that will form stereotypical conclusions about her, and comically hyperbolizes that this gaze prompts her to buy pre-sliced watermelon at the grocery store's salad bar, rather than whole watermelons in the produce section. Her humorous spin on these incidents highlights the irony of the pressure being placed not on whites to resist thinking in stereotypes but on blacks to

avoid making those stereotypes seem justified. While Sykes only discusses the pressure of the racial gaze, her observations could just as easily apply to her sexuality.¹¹ Given that most of her comments on her lesbianism center on her wife and their children, focusing on what she has in common with the straights in her audience, rather than how she is different, she may be more aware of the straight gaze than is initially clear. I have adapted the title of my dissertation-- *straight* people are looking at you--from this piece because queer people, like Sykes, are also put under pressure from various forces including popular culture, the gay mainstream, and the dominant, heterosexist culture at large to behave in ways that the heterosexual majority deem acceptable, without regard for their own variances and desires .

There is nothing new about this pressure, or the problems that come with it. Writing in 1955, James Baldwin, another gay person of color, described the "smile-and-the-world smiles-with-you-routine" that African-Americans were compelled to perform in order to make white Americans "like" them. Baldwin explains that this routine "did not work at all. No one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted"(1807). There are risks inherent in simply substituting "black" and "queer" in any discussion of oppression or civil rights movements, and I have no desire to trivialize or generalize the histories or current lived experiences of either group. However, both groups not only have a long history of representation in mainstream American film, television, and theatre, both have been subject to the pressure of assimilation and the pain of denigrating stereotypes. Equally

¹¹ Sykes does compare her experience of her sexuality to her race in another segment in the same special when she comically substitutes blackness for gayness as she describes the process of coming out. In this scenario, her mother asks her if hanging out with black people or watching *Soul Train* has made her think she's black, highlighting both the differences between the two subject positions (most black people have black parents while most gay people have straight parents) and the ridiculousness of the notion that identities are produced by peer pressure.

troubling is the fact that individuals in whom these identities overlap are often either erased or silenced in these representations

My project focuses on the way in which popular representations of gay people and the ideology of the gay and lesbian mainstream continue to privilege heterosexual approval of gay people over a politics that fully accounts for the complexity and diversity of gay people's lives. I discuss films, television shows, and plays created by both gay and straight artists for audiences that are predominantly straight. In conceiving and promoting each of these texts, creators must navigate between the two goals of educating this audience about an identity with which it is largely unfamiliar and offering the pleasure of identification with attractive characters. My contention is that far too much weight is given to the latter concern. In most mainstream texts, audiences are encouraged to identify and sympathize with characters that reflect the values of the dominant culture: white heterosexual men. Gay characters similarly work to shore up these values through their dependence on and desire to please the straight heroes. While these texts place much emphasis on the role gay-friendly straights play in gay people's lives, they rarely recognize the other side of this kind of representational politics, which is straight heroes' dependence on gay powerlessness and victimization. If gay people are presented as empowered and able to take care of themselves and each other, straight tolerance is neither necessary nor virtuous. The truly educational texts would be those that call attention to the fact of straight privilege and the ways in which it depends on gay subordination, but such portrayals are rare outside independent queer film and cable shows such as *Showtimes Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*.

Most of the texts I explore are part of the mainstream, which means that were conceived and marketed for a wide audience, but particularly an audience that shares the privileges that continue to be attached to whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness. Since a vast array of texts fall into this category, I have imposed several limitations on my objects of study. My project is devoted entirely to works of fiction because, while these are not the only texts that privilege dominant values over minority values, they are the ones that most transparently reflect the desires of both creators and audiences. Among these fictional texts, I only look at those that purport to present serious messages advocating gay equality, or at least tolerance; therefore, I omit texts that use gay characters only for comic relief without offering any kind of political commentary, as well as texts that include straightforwardly homophobic portrayals of gay people. Finally, I have chosen to focus primarily on portrayals of gay men. Much of my argument could be usefully applied to representations of lesbians, bisexuals, transsexual, and transgendered people, because all of these groups have been subordinated to straight privilege in popular texts. However, the persistent sexism of mainstream culture assures that male sexuality, whether hetero or homo, is portrayed more often than women's sexuality or transgender/transsexual sexuality. Gay male sexuality is also portrayed in vastly different ways than these others. Focusing on men allows me to pinpoint the tension between male privilege and straight privilege. For example, my first and second chapters focus on the chaste romanticism of gay male couples; gay men have the privilege of being represented, but this is trumped by the privilege straight men enjoy of excluding gay male sex from these representations because it makes them uncomfortable.

Fictional representations, of course, are informed as much by ideology as by lived experience, and I examine the ways in which gay and lesbian politics as well as dominant cultural values shape these representations. In the 1990s, such queer political groups as ACT-UP took a very serious interest in popular representations, directing their widely publicized rage not only at the mainstream culture's indifference to AIDS, but at what some perceived to be the homophobic portrayals of lesbians and transgendered people in films like 1992's *Basic Instinct* and 1991's *The Silence of the Lambs*. In the 2000s, however, organizations like GLAAD lavish praise and awards on films and television shows that claim to advocate for gay equality, even when these texts include deeply problematic portrayals of gay people. I argue that, because of the assimilationist focus of the gay mainstream, groups like GLAAD are less interested in complex positive representations of gay and lesbian people than in portrayals of both gays and straights that work to convince straight audiences of "gay-friendly" they already are.² Queer theory, on the other hand, often works to point out the oversights and exclusions of gay mainstream politics, focusing on such topics as the intersectionality of gayness with other kinds of identity, gay sexuality, and the feelings of shame and rage that cultural homophobia instills in gay people. However, while the gay mainstream is overly interested in what straight people think, radical queer theory often focuses attention solely on queer people. I argue that a consideration for how straight people perceive gays in mainstream culture does not have to entail support for assimilation. In fact, exclusive focus on gays and other sexual minorities in queer theory can create obstacles to social progress, rather than approaching this goal in more

² 'Gay-friendly' is an umbrella term that is applied to a varied spectrum of individuals and institutions ranging from those that actively promote social equality to those who proudly name one or two gay or lesbian people as "some of [their] best friends." For the purpose of clarity, I will use this term only to denote individuals and institutions that privilege personal relationships over political action.

inclusive ways. While the creators of mainstream culture have much to learn from queer theory, queer theorists can find mainstream culture a productive site for examining both opportunities for and obstacles to more equitable relationships between gay and straight people.

Gay Politics

The 1990s, the decade in which gay pride became mainstream, also saw the creation of a more conservative, assimilationist brand of gay and lesbian politics in contrast to the confrontational, radical tactics of groups like ACT-UP and Queer Nation. While the latter, more outspoken groups focused on the consequences of straight homophobia and indifference, particularly for gay men with AIDS, the new political vision focuses on the values some gay people share with the straight majority. In fact, one of the clearest goals of recent mainstream gay media continues to be persuading this majority of just how unthreatening gay and lesbian people are. Lisa Duggan calls this movement "the new homonormativity" and defines it as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture rooted in domesticity and consumption"(179). Clearly, the gay people who benefit from this privilege-oriented political movement are those who have only their gayness standing in the way of their access to privilege in the first place. The gay culture of the new homonormativity has little room for working class gays, gay people of color, and most young gay people, as well as gays who do not live in or near cities. Nonetheless, the most active spokespersons in this movement claim to be speaking for the

majority of gay people, even though, as Duggan points out, almost all of these central figures are white men (183). In effect, the new homonormativity constructs an assimilated, monolithic identity and punishes those who fail to fit into it with shame and invisibility, a seeming antithesis to gay pride. Such a narrowly restricted constituency cannot reflect the interests of the majority of gay, not to mention lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered or transsexual people, yet its spokespersons' claims work to erase these groups.

Michael Warner argues that this movement, which he calls "the official gay and lesbian movement"(24), is able to make such claims unchallenged because of the value American culture places on normalcy: "Political groups that mediate between queers and normals find that power lies almost exclusively on the normal side. The more you are willing to articulate political issues in a way that plays to a normal audience, the more success you are likely to have"(44). It is important here to recognize that by "queer" and "normal," Warner does not simply mean gay and straight. "Queers" are those whose sexuality deviates from the heteronormative standard, and many straight people may fall into this category. "Normal" refers to those who disavow any difference from the normative standard; for gay people, this is expressed in the claim that sexuality is irrelevant (46). While Duggan and Warner are not simply describing the same group and focusing on different elements of it--Duggan on the lack of racial and gender diversity and Warner on the lack of sex-positive perspectives--there is considerable overlap between the politics of the new homonormativity and the ideology of the official gay movement.

The standard to which gay people are held reveals the new homonormativity's investment in what Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurism," According to Edelman, queerness stands outside of the political because all politics depend on some version of what he which he defines as that which "impose[es] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). The organizing principle to which Edelman refers is the necessity of preserving a future for of the Child, the figure on which the social order places all its hopes for survival. In the gay movement's intense focus on marriage and adoption, on the creation of gay-parented families that resemble traditional straight ones as much as possible, what is being erased is the value of queerness, of resistance to a social standard that oppresses many straights as well as gays. This narrowing of focus onto two goals that will allow gays nearly complete absorption into the mainstream necessitates a denial not only of difference but pleasure and individuality as well.

One of the sites at which this overlap between gay and heteronormative political ideologies is most apparent is in the creation of gay-friendly texts for mainstream audiences. Most gay writers and producers fit into the narrow demographic privileged by the new homonormativity; while writers like Patrik-Ian Polk and Cheryl Dunye have made important contributions, they represent a small minority among gay artists, and their work is not as widely known as that of white gay men like Ryan Murphy. The texts themselves most often tackle the issues that are at the forefront of new homonormative politics, particularly marriage and the adoption of children. The importance creators place on this revised version of family values

produces gay characters that are so committed to being model citizens that they make their straight counterparts seem blissfully irresponsible in comparison. While straight relationships, from comedies to dramas to soap operas, are fraught with intrigue and conflict, few gay characters attempt anything more scandalous than remaining in the closet. I argue that, far from promoting equality, holding gays to such an exacting standard not only dooms them to failure, it reinforces the second class status of gay people. Straights have not only the privilege of universal access to marriage, but the privilege of having relationships fail without their sexuality being held responsible.

Representations Politics

This lack of variety certainly does not entail a lack of gay characters. In fact, there has been a proliferation of gay characters in films and on television since the 1990s, and such representation continues to grow today. However, many popular culture scholars have asked whether this growth has changed the way in which mainstream audiences see gay people. Some argue that the answer is yes, but that this change is less transformative than might be expected. Susan Danuta Walters writes, "Surely, times *are* better, but I believe there are ways in which this new visibility creates new forms of homophobia (for example, the good, marriage-loving, sexless gay vs. the bad, liberationist, promiscuous gay) that lends itself to a false and dangerous substitution of cultural visibility for inclusive citizenship [. . .] We may be *seen*, but I'm not sure we are *known* (10). This distinction between seeing and knowing is an important one, and one not often recognized in popular representations. The 2000s provide numerous examples of gay and lesbian characters, many of which are just gay enough to be recognized as

such. They identify themselves--or, more often, are identified by others--as gay, but we never see their love lives or any relationships besides those they share with the straight main characters. Until the 1990s, this was the primary means of representing gay and lesbian characters in mainstream television and film, but, by the mid-1990s, gay characters begin to appear as central figures on shows like *Will and Grace* and *Ellen*. However, only certain kinds of gay identity were allowed such prominent positions. Most central gay characters were white, middle-class professionals in monogamous relationships, and this continues to be the norm today on shows like ABC's *Modern Family*. Minority gay characters now occupy the role of funny gay best friend to which most gays were relegated in previous decades, as we see on shows like the WB's *Reba* and ABC's *Don't Trust the B in Apartment 23*. While all kinds of gay people are seen, those who are deemed worthy of being known are those that conform closely to a script that privileges dominant values and hierarchies.

Even gays who fit into these demographics pose some difficulties for mainstream audiences. Walters reflects on this anxiety in the form of a question: "Our current historical moment seems mired in this ambivalence: are gays the exotic other to be watched voyeuristically from a safe distance, or are gays just June and Ward Cleaver with different haircuts, family friends you can go bowling with and slap on the back?"(17). In the first possibility, gays are perceived as attractive, but dangerous, but in the second, they are more than simply familiar. Her comparison of gays to the loving parents from 1950s hit *Leave it to Beaver* suggests that gays are measured against an antiquated standard to which straight television couples no longer aspire. While she argues that the goal of such representations is to show that gays are "just like straights"(16), this comparison reveals the paradox that to be

perceived as equal, gays must, in fact, exceed the expectations straights have for themselves. Walters responds to this oppressive binary by advocating a "third way," between the notion of gays as other and gays as just like straights, which "facilitates the introduction and analysis of new (gay inspired) ideas and constructs about fundamental social structures and intimate relationships' to rethink and reimagine marriage, family, partnerships, sexual and gender identity, friendships, love relationships"(24). While this would certainly lead to a far greater variety of representations than is currently available, it maintains an insistence on positive representations in the form of stories about gay people who like each other. Walters still wants to see gay people represented as the Cleavers, only gayer. In her reading of Showtime's *Queer as Folk*, she writes,

Sure enough, many people live aimless and empty lives where politics, family, friends, and ideas are an afterthought to the burning quest for sexual pleasure, and old style disco dancing. And while I applaud the breakthrough quality of its depiction of gay sexuality, *Queer as Folk* seems to substitute sexuality of community and to imply that gay sexual expression means an erasure of everything else"(122).

While she acknowledges that such a gay community exists, it does not present the values she deems important to representations of gay people's lives. What Walters does not recognize is that advocating only positive, wholesome forms of gay complexity creates new limitations, removing some of the representational control from anxious straights only to place it in the hands of still anxious gays and lesbians.

While Walters' discussion of straight audiences is confined to the margins of her argument, Ron Becker places the anxieties gay representation poses for straight Americans at the center of his discussion of television in the 1990s and early 2000s: He defines "straight panic" as "the growing anxiety of a heterosexual culture and straight individuals confronting [the] shifting social landscape where categories of sexual identity were repeatedly scrutinized and traditional moral hierarchies regulating sexuality were challenged. In this process, the distinctions separating what it meant to be gay and lesbian from what it meant to be straight were both sharpened and blurred, producing an uneasy confusion"(4). In Becker's argument, the visibility of gays is a threat to the stability of straight identity. If being openly gay is a viable possibility, then how does one assert one's heterosexuality? Furthermore, why is it so important to do so? Becker addresses these questions by positing the optimistic view that "Straight America, once relatively oblivious to its heterosexuality and naïve about the privileges that came with it, was forced to acknowledge both, even as the stability of straight identity and dominance was being undermined"(4). Certainly, the mainstreaming of multiculturalism has made it impossible for the majority to assert its views as being the only ones available, but I argue that the creators of mainstream texts have been tremendously inventive in finding ways to subtly reassure majority audiences that their views are still the ones that matter most. In the texts I examine, straight, white, and male privilege are simultaneously reified and rendered invisible.

One tactic by which this strategy has succeeded has been through the creation of what author and activist Sarah Schulman calls a "fake public homosexuality." Among the elements of this construct are the ideas that, "Gay content is permissible if it focuses on romance" and

"Homophobia is unmentionable. Nothing that would express anger at straight people or illuminate the pain that straight people have caused or that would show straight people's complicity or responsibility in relation to homophobia is permitted" (147). The rules govern those texts created by gays as well as straights: "Gay-produced artwork that violates these rules is pushed to the margins. Gay-produced artwork that conforms to these rules can now be elevated to the slightly risqué environs of mainstream culture. The best and most important artwork, we're being told repeatedly, is made by straight people and strictly conforms to these restrictions."(147). For Schulman, the problem is not just the fact that the most successful representations are catered to straight audiences, but that they are created by straight artists who lack the authentic experience of gayness to which she and other gay writers are privy. Schulman is committed to asserting gay difference and diversity, but she is also deeply skeptical of straight audiences' ability to view possibilities within the representation of gay people besides the reflection of straight tolerance. Unless one advocates the creation of gay art solely for gay audiences, these representations must produce some kind of pleasure for both majority and minority audiences.

These three scholars advocate for very different things in representations of gay and lesbian people. Walters argues in favor of a variety of complex, but positive, portrayals of gays and lesbians in film and television. Becker asserts that televisual representations educate straight viewers not only about gays and lesbians, but about themselves. Schulman suggests that gay and lesbian experiences will never been authentically presented to audiences until these audiences become interested in what gay and lesbian artists have to say about themselves. While each makes important points, each misses something essential to truly

transforming the way in which straight/queer relationships are negotiated in mainstream texts. Walters exposes the problem with asserting that gays and lesbians are just like straights while, in fact, holding them to a much more exacting standard than straight couples. However, the positive representations of gays in loving relationships that she advocates reifies the opposing sense of gays as other to the straight norm. If gays are to be treated as equals in popular representation, then we should see more gay and lesbian adultery, divorce, and domestic violence. All of these things occur pervasively in representations of straight couples without raising any concerns about how straight people, as a group, are being depicted.

Becker certainly makes valid points about the ways in which the growth in queer visibility has forced straights to rethink their own cultural position. However, I argue that one of the things this growth also reveals is the elasticity of straight privilege. Popular culture can accommodate a tremendous number of gay people without ever running the risk of displacing straight people and their interests from the center. It is not an increase in numbers that is needed, but, rather, more thoughtful challenges to the privileges enjoyed by straights and the subtle forms of homophobia, such as the heroization of tolerant straights, used to justify these privileges.

While Becker's view may be over-optimistic, Schulman's pessimism about straight audiences is self-defeating. In *Stagestruck*, she laments the fact that the representations of people with AIDS that reach mainstream audiences are the ones that privilege straight white male viewpoints while the perspectives of gays and lesbians, people of color, and women are banished to the margins. While she clearly and eloquently identifies the problem, she is not

forthcoming with a solution. If the problem is simply that straight people are resolutely committed to defending their privileges regardless of the cost to others, there is very little gay and lesbian artists can do. A more proactive solution would be for gay and lesbian artists to challenge, rather than flatter, straight audiences with their representations of gay and straight characters, to confront them with what they already know to be true. Just as gay visibility is growing in mainstream film, television, and theatre, gay people are being more confident in living their lives openly in the real world. Surely, it is time to show straight people representations of gay people that reflect the diversity they already know exists.

Queer Theory

If the problem with popular representations of gays is that they strictly conform to the standards of the new homonormativity, as I have argued, then perhaps the solution lies in writers and producers drawing inspiration from other modes of thinking about gays' lives. Queer theorists have been challenging the politics of representation and the gay mainstream since the 1980s, but, more recently, a number of queers theorists have pointed to problems within the central tenants of queer theory that bear striking similarities to queer critiques of heteronormative culture. According to scholar Cathy J. Cohen, queer theory closes down certain coalitional possibilities through its "elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity," arguing that this "seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival"(34). While acknowledging the pervasive homophobia that exists in some marginalized communities, Cohen write that she is "still not interested in disassociating politically from those communities, for queerness, as it is

currently constructed, offers no viable political alternative since it invites us to put forth a political agenda that makes invisible the prominence of race, class, and to varying degrees gender in determining the life chances of those on both sides of the hetero/queer divide"(35). Cohen positions "queer" as one subject among many that make up a politicized identity. Race, class, gender, and sexual identity are distinct, but equally important.

In Cohen's conception, queer theory has much more in common with the "new homonormativity" Lisa Duggan describes than many queer theorists would like to admit. E. Patrick Johnson, one of the editors of the 2005 anthology *Black Queer Theory*, suggests a remedy in arguing the need for what he describes as "quare" theory to supplement the oversights of queer theory.

I wish to "quare" "queer" such that ways of knowing are viewed both as discursively mediated and historically constituted and materially conditioned. This reconceptualization foregrounds the way in which gays and lesbians, bisexuals, gays, and transgendered people of color come to sexual and racial knowledge. Moreover, quare studies acknowledges the different 'standpoints' found among lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people of color differences--differences that are also conditioned by class and gender"(127).

He explains that quare studies differs from queer theory primarily in the former's refusal to abandon identity politics. Johnson recognizes that "blind allegiance to 'isms' of any kind is one of the fears of queer theorists who critique identity politics. Cognizant of that risk, quare studies must not deploy a totalizing and/or homogeneous formulation of identity, but rather a

contingent, fragile coalition in the struggle against common oppressive forms"(136). Not only queer theorists, but also creators of gay representations have much to learn from these ideas. "Quaring" popular representation would involve the creation not of gay characters that "just happen to be" black, or poor, or female, but for whom these identity categories intersect in meaningful ways. It is not enough to include more gay people who are also marginalized in other ways; this tactic can, and often does, create a new kind of tokenism. Texts that include careful consideration of the ways in which the overlapping of these identities affects the cultural meanings they take on can avoid the consequence of further othering minorities. What mainstream texts have shown during the late 1990s and early 2000s has been that no amount of studying gays in all their diversity will alone explain the problem of inequality because it is only looks at half of the issue.

Dariek Scott makes such a complaint about debates among black gay male artists and writers about black men who are attracted to white lovers. Scott argues that a racialized theory of sexuality should not limit itself to racial minorities, warning, "If the only set of meanings we want to interrogate are those of the always-sexualized (and always reduced *to* sexuality) black male body, and one's absolute desire or absolute disregard for it, then that body remains the only one which can have a racialized sexuality (or a sexualized race). It is time that gay men of Color return the gaze, and pay close attention to what we see"(310). Scott calls for an examination of the role race plays in all scenarios of sexual attraction, from all perspectives. I would argue that Scott's argument could be usefully expanded to include relationships between gay men and straight men of all races as well. Scott's approach works to demystify whiteness by subjecting it to the same critical focus previously directed at black gay men's bodies and

desires, but heterosexuality is also very much in need of demystification, which cannot take place as long as queer theory remains focused only on queer people. The intersectional approach I take in this project considers the ways in which white privilege and straight privilege work together and advocates for anti-homophobic, anti-racist texts that work to challenge both.

Currently, most representations of such gay/straight relationships focus on the gay man's sexuality as a problem, whether he is attracted to the straight man or not, while ignoring the problems of straight anxiety and straight privilege. As Ron Becker argues, mainstream texts in 1990s and 2000s explore the anxieties that gay visibility has created for straight audiences, but I will demonstrate that this anxiety most often relates to straights asserting their heterosexuality, even as they deny the privilege that comes with it. My approach addresses the question of what it is that straights want from representations of gay people. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Michael Bronski makes the provocative argument that homophobia "is a completely rational fear. Homosexuality strikes at the heart of Western culture and societies"(8). This is largely because the non-reproductive nature of homosexuality easily, if problematically, allows it to be conflated with irresponsible pleasure. Bronski argues, "the specter of homosexuality haunts the mainstream imagination in a way that is persistent and unique [. . .] it arises from the imaginations of heterosexuals who find homosexuality--and everything it signifies--both frighteningly lurid and very titillating"(16). In some respects, popular representation has constituted a means of disciplining homosexuality; on popular shows like *Glee* and even in such homo-centric texts as the Broadway hit *Angels in America*, gay pleasure is punished, and only straights have the pleasure of irresponsibility. Straight

audiences may be fascinated by gay texts and their creators, but how might they react to representations not dictated by their own interests?

In the four chapters that make up my dissertation, I examine not only representations of gay men in American mainstream texts, but representations of both homophobic and purportedly gay-friendly straight men. What I discover is that straight homophobia, when it is recognized at all, is minimized, or dismissed, or relegated to the margins of the text. Most of the characters whose homophobia is a central focus of their stories, and subject to criticism from other characters, are themselves gay. This creates the illusion that straight male homophobia is either inevitable or innocuous; when it is perceived as a problem, it is never the straight hero's. In fact, central straight characters are often presented as the only ones that can address the problem, thus rendering the objects of homophobia dependant on them. This not only reinforces gay subordination to straight interests, it renders these interests demonstrably, if not practically, gay friendly. Ironically, the texts that do directly address straight homophobia are the ones that receive the most criticism from the gay mainstream and assimilationist-minded gay critics. These are texts that either predate the mainstreaming of gay politics, as is the case with Mart Crowley's play *The Boys in the Band*, or are produced by a theoretically minded queer minority, like Tom Kalin's film *Swoon*. In comparing these texts, it becomes clear that gays must pay a very high cost in terms of their own power, pleasure, and relationships in order obtain the acceptance--often, merely the tolerance--of the straight majority. The growth of gay visibility is not a sign of equality, merely a sign that the creators of mainstream texts have become more adept at creating a facsimile of it. In order to produce texts that treat gays

and straights as equals, writers and artists have a lot to learn from more marginal works by and about gay people that do privilege gay interests.

I begin with a chapter that discusses the relationship between representations for mainstream audiences and the "new homonormativity" in one of the most current mainstream texts in my project: Fox network's musical comedy *Glee*. This text has the distinction of including the largest number of LGBT characters (at least one of each category) of any mainstream television show. While in some ways it is certainly promising to see such specifically gay-themed material take center stage in prime time television, I argue that an examination of *Glee*, and the gay and straight mainstream discourses surrounding it, reveals that "gay-friendly" programming works effectively to reassure straights that gay visibility is not a threat to heterosexual privilege. The proliferation of gay characters on popular television shows, at the very least, that mainstream audiences are getting used to seeing representations of sexual difference, but this does not really change the way straight viewers see gay people or themselves. I focus not only on *Glee's* representation of gay teenagers but also of their straight allies in order to examine the hierarchies and double standards that continue to be reproduced in both popular culture and the gay mainstream. These include the privileging of certain kinds of gay identity over others and gays' relationships with straight friends and family (as well as the interests of "gay-friendly" straight people in general) over relationships among gay people.

From *Glee*, I move on to chapter focused on another mainstream film, one of the first to present a gay man with AIDS, Jonathan Demme's Academy Award winning courtroom drama, *Philadelphia*. While the film shares *Glee's* caution in making heterosexual audiences

comfortable, its writer and director assume that their audience is homophobic. Nonetheless, in their presumption that their audience members want to see themselves as innocent with regards to their attitudes towards homosexuality and AIDS, rather than willfully ignorant, the makers of *Philadelphia* actually nurture this ignorance by making the controversial aspects of these characters disappear. In its attempts to create sympathy for gay men with AIDS, *Philadelphia* erases the historical facts that complicated views of AIDS patients as doomed and dependant on heterosexual caretakers. The film also erases the privileges enjoyed not only by the audience but also many people with AIDS, as white men, while at the same time ignoring the doubly underprivileged status of those who inhabit more than one marginalized identity. Finally, I examine the ways in which the film tries, and fails, to erase the reality of gay male sexuality, which the filmmakers deem, along with the fear of AIDS, to be the source of the audience's homophobia.

In chapter three, I turn to another film from the early 1990s, but one that could hardly be more different from *Philadelphia*. Tom Kalin's *Swoon* is one of the key texts in what film critic B. Ruby Rich dubbed the "new queer cinema," a group of independent films that arose from the gay activism of the 1990s. It is the only non-mainstream text my dissertation examines at length. I chose to include it because it is an example of a representation that does challenge heteronormativity and asks both gay and straight viewers to rethink the narrow idealism of positive representations of gay people. *Swoon* retells the story of Jewish teenagers Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold's kidnapping and murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks in 1924 and the following trial; this case has previously been fictionalized in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope* (1948) and Richard Fleischer's *Compulsion* (1958). *Swoon* works partially as a

response to these earlier works, but also as a counterpoint to representations of queers in mainstream films. I argue that *Swoon* stands in contrast to both in that it neither condemns its queer characters nor asks its audience to sympathize with them, but instead examines the discourses by which the pair has been othered to critique a social order that takes heteronormativity for granted.

In my final chapter, I move away from film to look at two American plays that can only be described as homo-centric. Mart Crowley's classic but often maligned 1969 play *The Boys in the Band* and Tony Kushner's highly praised 1993 play *Angels in America* explore the diversity of relationships, some of which are difficult to define, that exist in gay communities. Crowley presents a group of gay men whose relationships are plagued by racism, effeminophobia, self-hatred, and hypocrisy, while Kushner play clearly works to affirm the lives of gay men, particularly gay men with AIDS . The differences in these plays reflect not only changes in the lives of gay men, but changes in mainstream audiences as well. Both plays, *Angels in America* on Broadway and *Boys in the Band* in off-Broadway productions, drew audiences comprised largely of people who were middle-class, white, and straight. This chapter addresses what I see as the most crucial difference between these two plays: the approaches they take to presenting the lives of gay men, particularly effeminate men and men of color, for this audience. While the older play seeks not only to educate its audience about the struggles gay men face, but to implicate them in these very struggles, *Angles in America* rewards its audience by excluding straight characters almost entirely and keeping straight privilege and homophobia untouched subjects. A view in which Crowley's play is a relic that predates the movement towards equality that Kushner's represents gives the first play too little credit and the second too much. It is

important both to recognize what we in the present can learn from the past and to recognize the new problems created in the process of moving forward.

I end with a conclusion that reiterates the claims and unifying arguments of my project and also poses questions that I have not been able to address in the dissertation, but may explore in future projects. I also plan to include a brief discussion of an ongoing television series that initially took the risk of challenging viewers with a complex gay character only to give in to popular demand by subordinating his story to that of anachronistically gay-friendly straight men in its third season. *Downton Abbey*, which tells the story of an aristocratic British family living in a Yorkshire country house in the early twentieth century, has enjoyed extraordinary popularity in America. Perhaps because of the era in which it was set, the show breaks politically correct conventions by presenting its sole gay character as a scheming, anti-social villain. However, also in consideration of the era, the show also presents this character as strongly shaped by the hostility and invisibility that surrounds his sexual identity. This text illustrates my point that truly thought-provoking representations of gays do not have to be positive. I argue throughout that "positive representations" ultimately reify gays' position as second class citizens whose access to any kind of social agency depends on being "liked" by the straight majority.

What I hope this project will contribute to the ongoing discussion of gay people in popular American texts is a sense of the importance of focusing attention not only on direct homophobia and its impact on gay people, but the more subtle, often ignored problems that allow homophobia to continue flourishing. One of these is the homogenization of gay identity by the new mainstream, which ignores the ways in which sexual identity intersects with racial,

gender, and class identity. This view of identity ignores the ways in which gay people who are marginalized in other ways are subject to a greater variety of types, and intensities, of homophobia. Another problem is the construction of gay identity in ways that appeal to straight audiences, but are unrecognizable to gay ones; an example would be representations of monogamous gay couples that stress family values but omit sensuality. A related issue is the way in which such texts superficially advocate equality among people of all races, genders, and sexual orientations, but ultimately work to reinforce the privileges enjoyed by straight white men. While the numbers of gay characters in popular film, television, and drama are encouraging, my goal is to call attention to these common problems that pose obstacles to true progress. Equitable representations will remain out of reach until writers and creators consider the diversity and desires of gay audiences as well as straight ones.

Glee and Gay-Friendly Straight Privilege

Introduction

In May 2011, *Salon* magazine described FOX network's musical comedy hit *Glee* as "one of the most fearlessly gay-friendly shows ever to air on primetime"(Williams). While the show has been both praised and condemned for its focus on gay and lesbian teenagers, few have clarified what being "gay-friendly" actually means within popular culture. The yearly report produced by GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) suggests that it has to do with numbers of LGBT characters featured on television. According to this report, FOX features the greatest number of such characters, 8 out of 117 series regulars, most of which appear in this musical comedy (Stransky). *Entertainment Weekly's* special report titled "Gay Teens on TV" argues that it is not only numbers, but diversity and likeability that are important: "teen skewing networks are leading the way in showing even more facets of gay life [. . .]*Glee*, however, has taken the message to a mass-audience network on a top-rated show, while also giving viewers a character they love"(Armstrong 38). The article describes the show's central gay character, Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer) as "a new kind of gay hero [. . .] one who's loved as much for his boa wearing as he is for fending off bullies and forming a touching, step-brotherly bond with his former crush"(Armstrong 36). While the cover of the issue features Kurt in a romantic embrace with his crush, Blaine (Darren Criss), this is not the relationship most celebrated in the article. Armstrong writes that this new hero is "born" when he comes out to his father. It is no coincidence that a character that is so loved by the mainstream audience is also loved by the show's straight male characters in particular. Kurt's, and *Glee's*, popularity begs the question, what has changed? Have mainstream television audiences become more

accepting and open-minded about representations of gay and lesbian people's lives, or have network television writers become more adept at presenting gay characters that do not threaten heterosexual privilege or mainstream values?

While in some ways it is certainly promising to see such specifically gay-themed material take center stage in prime time television, I argue that an examination of *Glee*, and the gay and straight mainstream discourses surrounding it, reveals that "gay-friendly" programming works effectively to reassure straights that gay visibility is not a threat to heterosexual privilege.³ Popular culture scholar Suzanne Danuta Walters argues that visibility is "necessary for equality [. . .] part of the trajectory of any movement for inclusion and social change," but it does not "erase stereotypes or guarantee liberation"(13). The proliferation of gay characters on popular television shows, at the very least, that mainstream audiences are getting used to seeing representations of sexual difference, but does this really change the way straight viewers see gay people or themselves? In this chapter, I focus not only on *Glee's* representation of gay teenagers but also of their straight allies in order to examine the hierarchies and double standards that continue to be reproduced in both popular culture and the gay mainstream. These include the privileging of certain kinds of gay identity over others and gays' relationships with straight friends and family (as well as the interests of "gay-friendly" straight people in general) over relationships among gay people.

Gay-Friendly Straights

³ 'Gay-friendly' is an umbrella term that is applied to a varied spectrum of individuals and institutions ranging from those that actively promote social equality to those who proudly name one or two gay or lesbian people as "some of [their] best friends." For the purpose of clarity, I will use this term only to denote individuals and institutions that privilege personal relationships over political action.

The creators of *Glee* have been particularly effective in catering to the interests of both gays and straights in that it offers gays some positive images of themselves without calling heterosexual privilege into question. This skill in compromise is hardly new to network television. In his book, *Gay TV and Straight America*, Ron Becker argues that the 1990s saw the creation of a new, gay-friendly demographic including young, liberal-minded, urban viewers who saw watching gay-themed television as a way affirm their open-mindedness (110). While many Americans felt ambivalent about homosexuality, "such ambivalence [. . .] was likely part of the appeal. After all, being gay-friendly could give the socially liberal and urban-minded the thrill of edginess precisely because it involved transgressing social norms; accepting homosexuality implied that there was something that needed to be accepted"(130-131.) *Glee* reflects a change in this view in that it broadens the blanket term "gay friendly" to include audiences who are not urban or particularly liberal-minded. Part of the show's broad appeal stems from the fact that it is not set in New York or Los Angeles but in a small town in the Midwest, and some of the characters who are most committed in their support of gays and lesbians are those who are furthest from the demographic Becker describes. While Becker's urban viewers derive their enjoyment of gay representations from the exclusivity their tolerance gives them, *Glee's* audience partakes in the inclusive ideal that anyone can be gay friendly. In both cases, however, gay-friendliness is manifested as self-interest rather than a commitment to anti-homophobic politics. Not only are the liberal urbanites Becker describes not necessarily interested in equal rights for gays, the achievement of these would actually undo some of the benefits of gay friendliness they enjoy. Choosing friends and acquaintances from groups that are not subject to discrimination does not make one stand out. Mainstream

television has tapped into this need by presenting audiences with gay characters who need help from, and hardly ever criticize, straight people. In spite of the attractions of gay friendliness, the prospect of close proximity to gays and lesbians, even if this space is mediated by a television, is not without tensions and anxiety for straight viewers.

Becker argues that the 1990s were a time of intense renegotiations of sexual identity. He outlines two ways in which heterosexuals responded, and continue to respond, to the increasing visibility of homosexuality: homosexual panic--a psychiatric and, later, judicial term-- and "straight panic," a term Becker coins himself. According to him, "homosexual panic is a term that has been variously employed to explain what happens to heterosexuals when they come face-to-face with the socially stigmatized specter of homosexuality"(17). When used in a courtroom as a defense for men who have attacked or even killed gay men, homosexual panic works to normalize homophobia. Becker argues that "shifting the cause of homosexual panic from the conflict between homosexual desires and heterosexual identity within the patient to the aggressive, 'perverse cravings' of the gay victim, for example, enables the defense to use the homophobic sentiments in the courtroom to its advantage rather than its detriment"(19). When this defense is successful, it works because judges and jurors see gay men as sexual predators that can only be stopped through violence.

Straight panic is different in that the person expressing it is more likely to deny homophobia than to attempt to universalize it. Becker writes,

if homosexual panic held sway in a culture unsure about the ontology of sexuality but utterly convinced of homosexuality's depravity, then straight

panic arises in a culture not only uncertain about the ontology of sexual identity but also uncertain about heterosexuality's moral authority [. . .] straight panic is what happens when heterosexual men and women, still insecure about the boundary between gay and straight, confront an increasingly accepted homosexuality"(23).

At first glance, the second means of coping is obviously less homophobic than the first, but Becker's choice to retain the word "panic" is clearly important. In both cases, the person doing the panicking wants to be perceived as straight, and the cause of anxiety is the possibility that he or she might be mistaken for gay. Why would this potential for confusion be such a source of anxiety unless heterosexuality is seen as superior? While Becker does not regard straight panic as necessarily homophobic, it is worth asking if being afraid of being taken for gay really so different from being afraid of gays. I would argue that the difference between the two kinds of panic is not that one is homophobic and one is not, but that one expresses homophobia openly as violence with the other attempts to conceal its anxiety through tolerance and friendliness. Becker argues that straight panic originated when "Straight America, once relatively oblivious to its heterosexuality and naïve about the privileges that came with it, was forced to acknowledge both, even as the stability of straight identity and dominance was being undermined"(4). I want to suggest, however, that straight panic can work in ways that simultaneously cling to and erase straight privilege.

One of the ways in which straight panic is negotiated in mainstream television is through what Becker terms the "helpful heterosexual" trope. He writes, "Like the liberal

concept of tolerance, the trope of the helpful heterosexual offers a reassurance of an empowered, gay-friendly heterosexuality. The notion of tolerance reaffirms heterosexual privilege by positioning heterosexuals as agents and gays and lesbians as passive recipients of their largesse. Straights tolerate; gays are tolerated"(191). The focus of Becker's analysis is on the lack of agency granted the gay and lesbian characters in the scenarios he discusses rather than the motives of their heterosexual protectors, but I want to suggest that the role of helpful heterosexual may be taken up deliberately as a way of laying claim to heterosexual privilege without acknowledging it. Theorist Lee Edelman explains heterosexuals'--in this case, particularly men's--need to distinguish themselves from gay men as follows:

the historical positing of the category of 'the homosexual' textualizes male identity as such, subjecting it to the alienating requirement that it be 'read' and threatening, in consequence, to strip 'masculinity' of its privileged status as the self-authenticating paradigm of the natural or the self-evident itself. Now, it must *perform* its self-evidence, must represent its own difference from the derivative and artificial masculinity of the gay man. (12)

What makes Edelman's conception of the dilemma straight men face different from Becker's is the notion that the culture in which this takes place does view as heterosexuality as natural, original, and, therefore, superior to homosexuality. I want to argue that taking up a "helpful heterosexual" position represents one way of textualizing male heterosexual identity in opposition to homosexual identity, even as this position appears to be explicitly anti-homophobic. In many of Becker's examples, as well as the ones I discuss in *Glee*, the

heterosexual hero, who is usually male, defends the gay person against attackers who are obviously homophobic. By enacting this defense, the hero not only asserts his difference from the gay person--who, we are lead to believe, cannot defend him or herself--but also his superiority to other presumably straight men. Considered in this light, it may be argued that the helpful heterosexual is the ultimate expression of a self-authenticating masculine paradigm that is all the more valuable because it excludes gay men and homophobic men alike.

The "New Homonormativity"

At the same time that heterosexuals were redefining themselves as gay-friendly, the emergent gay mainstream was working to repackage homosexuality in the mainstream media in straight-friendly terms. Sexual politics scholar Lisa Duggan calls this reconfiguration "the new homonormativity," which she defines as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture rooted in domesticity and consumption"(179). The "new homonormativity" relies on the belief that the most important battles for gay rights will have been won when gay couples are able to enjoy the same privileges as straight couples, particularly the benefits that come with officially sanctioned marriage. It is not interested in the rights of gay people who are single, or promiscuous, or those who are members of other marginalized groups. The politics of the new homonormativity are evident in representations of gays and lesbians in mainstream texts like *Glee*. The overwhelming majority of gay characters on this show and others are white, affluent, and male, and the storylines in which they are most prominently featured often involve the

acquisition of rights historically only allowed heterosexual couples, such as marriage and adoption. Gay characters that do not fit this family friendly model are usually disciplined, often by other gay people, and the aspect of their lives that provokes the most discipline, at least on *Glee*, is sex.

While Duggan focuses on the ways in which the new homonormativity excludes the interests of feminists and people of color, Michael Warner criticizes the "official gay movement," which he defines as "[the movement's] major national organizations, its media, its most visible spokespersons" for having "increasingly narrowed its scope to those issues of sexual orientation that have least to do with sex"(24-25). He suggests that the movement clings to respectability by abjecting gays and lesbians who are too readily associated with sex and who have too much sex or the wrong kinds of sex (32-33). While explaining that gay identity and sexuality cannot be treated as interchangeable, Warner argues that "to have a politics of [identity] without [sex] is to doom oneself to incoherence and weakness"(31). This is because it is sexual desire that sets gays and lesbians at the margins of mainstream respectability, so it is sex that has created the need for a gay movement in the first place. However, because sex is what makes this group different, many in the movement chose to ignore it in favor of advocating for rights that will allow gays and lesbians privileges historically allowed only to straights. While Warner does not raise this point, one of the things these rights have in common is the fact that they immediately address only queer adults. This is not the case with sexuality, although the silence about queer youth and sex in the gay and straight mainstreams would suggest this.

Theorists writing about queer youth sexualities have, understandably, been concerned with the question of influence: how do queer youth become sexual subjects and from whom do they, or should they, receive their sexual educations? As Warner writes, "people are constantly encouraged to believe that heterosexual desire, dating, marriage, reproduction, child-rearing and home life are not only valuable in themselves, but the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests [. . .] Nonstandard sex has none of this normative richness"(47). For some queer theorists, however, this difference creates alternate possibilities for queers' sexual education within their own communities. In her essay "Tales of the Avunculate," Eve Sedgwick stresses the importance of gay children having *gay* adult models, arguing that the problem with the family as the site of all formative identifications and desires is in itself heterosexist. This is because the traditional nuclear family "is limited by tendentious prior identification to parents--to adults already defined as procreative within a heterosexual bond"("Tales of the Avunculate" 64). This model can only accommodate homosexuality as inversion, as Sedgwick explains in a footnote, : "the inversion topos depending, after all, on a view of desire itself as something that can subsist only between a "masculine" and a "feminine" self, in whatever sex of bodies these notional selves may be housed" (64). She points to the figure of the "uncle" as an alternative, and superior, source of information for gay male youth:" 'Uncle' has been common [. . .]as a metonym for the whole range of older men who might form a relation to a younger man (as patron, friend, literal uncle, godfather, adoptive father, sugar daddy)offering a degree of initiation into gay cultures and identities"(59). Sedgwick argues that it is sometimes possible for a child to choose an adult sexual model for him or herself, but only when she or he has access to some variety in adults to choose from (64).While she acknowledges that gay youth have

some agency in their choice of educators, Sedgwick assumes that this education must come directly, and from adults. This is a notion that has come under fire from scholars who claims that a compulsion to fit into models presented by adults, regardless of these adults' sexualities, is limiting.

In her essay "Intelligibility and Narrating Queer Youth," education scholar Susan Talburt explains "intelligibility" as the process by which society expects its children to "acquire knowledge of self and others (the world and their place in it) and [. . .] become intelligible to others as such and such"(17). She problematizes this process as it relates to the relationship between anti-homophobic adults and queer youth, arguing that "dominant narratives about queer youth make youth intelligible--to others and to themselves in narrowly defined ways. These narratives constitute a production of subject positions in which adults administer a group with problems and needs--and participate in inventing those whom we would help"(18). According to Talburt, this process of intelligibility "creates a binary of (1) narratives of risk and danger and (2) narratives of the well-adjusted, out, and proud gay youth"(18). She argues that even well-intentioned, anti-homophobic adults can limit the possibilities of queer teenagers by imagining that knowledge can flow in only one direction and by failing to recognize the variety of possible queer identities. How much more, then, can queer youths' identities be hemmed in by pressure to conform to models that privilege the interests of heterosexuals, both adults and other teenagers?

I argue that this is the kind of model presented in *Glee*, a comedy that presents the struggles and relationships among the members of a glee club in central Ohio and their

teachers, and which has, as demonstrated earlier, drawn much mainstream praise for the number and diversity of its queer characters. The show provides a rich cite for examining the ways in which gay teenagers and their straight allies are constructed and judged within both dominant culture and the new homonormativity. Since it first aired in fall 2009, the show has covered such topics as coming out of the closet, homophobic bullying, bisexuality, and even gay teenage romance, and the number of gay characters has grown each season.⁴ In spite of this explosion of gay characters, Kurt, who comes out within the first few episodes of season one, serves as the show's model gay teenager. Each of these characters becomes intelligible in a different way, but each is compared with Kurt at some point, some on several occasions, always unfavorably. I argue that this reveals two things about the show's ideological investment in representing queer identities: 1) its mainstream friendly investment in heterosexual privilege, and 2) its support of the homonormative respectability, specifically the ideal Kurt represents as an out, proud, chaste gay teenager. While Kurt becomes the standard against which all other gay teenagers are measured in season three, in seasons one and two, his views on sexuality and his own sexual identity are shaped by his experiences with his straight friends and family. My discussion of *Glee* and the media discourse surrounding it is divided into two parts. The first examines the way in which this discourse privileges heterosexual understandings of gay identity, community, and politics, and the role that straight panic and the paradigm of "helpful heterosexuality" play both in this discourse and on the show itself. The second section examines the politics of gay respectability that inform *Glee* and its position as a cultural text.

⁴ In the show's first season, only Kurt becomes intelligible as gay. Season two introduces Blaine, but viewers also discover that David Karofsky, a jock who bullies Kurt in season one, and Santana Lopez, a heterosexually promiscuous cheerleader, are in the closet. In season three, the latter three characters become more prominent, though Kurt remains the central gay character, and Sebastian Smythe is introduced.

Out, Proud, and Well Behaved

While the politics of the new homonormativity feature little criticism of gay-friendly straights, it holds gay people to a very high standard, as several examples of media focused on *Glee* illustrate. In 2010, Ryan Murphy, *Glee*'s outspoken, openly gay co-creator, asked for the support of Jarrett Barrios, president of GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), to boycott *Newsweek* after the magazine published an article called "Straight Talk" by gay writer Ramin Setoodeh. In this piece, Setoodeh argues that it is difficult for many to accept gay actors in straight roles because "as viewers, we are molded by a society obsessed with dissecting sexuality." He makes examples of several gay actors whom he finds unconvincing in specific straight roles, examples that many have commented on as unfair and inaccurate.⁵ Murphy and Barrios responded by attacking Setoodeh personally. In an open letter to *Newsweek*'s editor, Murphy describes the writer as "homophobic," "self-loathing," and "deeply in need of some education," an education he believes a visit to the set of *Glee* can provide. He concludes his letter with an invitation for Setoodeh to visit *Glee*'s set, saying, "Hopefully, then he can see how we take care to do a show about inclusiveness [. . .] a show that encourages all viewers no matter their sexual orientation to go after their hopes and dreams and not be pigeonholed by dated and harmful rhetoric . . . rhetoric he sadly spews and believes in." (rpt. in "*Glee*'s Ryan Murphy Calls for *Newsweek* Boycott"). Barrios issued a statement including the following: "Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender actors can play a wide variety of diverse roles and Setoodeh's perspective on this issue reflects his own discomfort that he attempts to project

⁵ A number of actors, both gay and straight, wrote similar responses to "Straight Jacket," including Kristin Chenoweth, Cheyenne Jackson, and Michael Urie ("*Glee*'s Ryan Murphy Calls for *Newsweek* Boycott"). Broadway World.com

onto the audience by indicting Sean Hayes instead of examining his own inability to embrace gay actors in straight roles"("GLAAD: Newsweek Article Sends a "Damaging Message). By attacking Setoodeh personally, both Murphy and Barrios ignore the overarching argument in his piece, which he ends by asking, "If an actor the stature of George Clooney came out of the closet tomorrow, would we still accept him as a heterosexual leading man? It's hard to say. Or maybe not. Doesn't it mean something that no openly gay actor like that exists?" ("Straight Talk"). This is a valid question, and could have served as a starting place for conversation about the inequities gay actors still have to overcome. In their refusal to address the questions Setoodeh poses, Murphy and Barrios overlook, rather than denying or refuting, his notion that homophobia still pervades American culture. While their statements seem anti-homophobic, Murphy and Barrios ignore the continued inequities faced by gays and lesbians in the entertainment industry by insisting they are figments of some gay people's imaginations.

Instead, they focus attention on the use of formerly disparaging terms to describe gays and lesbians: for example, Setoodeh's use of the word "queeny," to describe openly gay actors Sean Hayes and Jonathan Groff.⁶ While language can be a clear indicator of discrimination, the belief that certain words can only mean what they mean in dominant, heterosexist discourse is itself heterosexist because it denies the existence of a queer counterdiscourse . To assume that the meanings these words take on when they are used to discredit, trivialize, or punish gay men is to privilege homophobia over the attempts of gays to reappropriate these terms for anti-homophobic uses. In this second sense, these terms can be understood as describing solidarity

⁶ Sean Hayes is best known for his role as the effeminate Jack McFarland on NBC's hit *Will and Grace*. Jonathan Groff is a Broadway star who appears in several episodes of *Glee* as straight character Jesse St. James.

and even admiration.⁷ Setoodeh is not the only gay writer to be attacked for his word choice when writing about this show. Brett Berk also drew fire for his *Vanity Fair* column "The Gay Guide to Glee." In his review of "Sexy," he discusses a scene in which the Dalton Academy Warblers, a glee club too which Blaine and Kurt (briefly) belong, perform a song for an audience from an all-girls school that has been invited to their practice to gauge the number's "sexiness" for competition purposes, posing the question, "how can having girls in the audience make these cartwheeling, foam-party fags straight-sexy?" ("A Gay Guide to Glee, Episode 15"). After the post received a number of negative comments, Berk modified this piece, removing this word and including an apology, which he follows up by qualifying his original word choice: "As an openly gay writer writing in an overtly overblown style, my intent in using the word in this offhanded way was to continue my consistent efforts to confront and challenge stereotype, to unpack the way in which language works, and to deconstruct the clever gender politics at play in the scene I described" ("A Gay Guide to *Glee*, Episode 15). However, by exchanging "fags" for the sexually-neutral "guys," Berk not only makes his review more politically correct, he changes its original meaning. Calling these characters "fags" is an attempt to make explicit a homoeroticism that the presence of the girls potentially diffuses. As is the case with Setoodeh's piece, attacks based on rhetoric used to describe gay people actually shuts down productively anti-homophobic questions and positions in favor of a more superficial emphasis on political correctness.

⁷. Since Setoodeh also writes of Hayes that "his sexual orientation is part of who he is, and also part of his charm" and describes Groff as "a knockout singer and a heartthrob," it seems more likely that he is using this term in this sense, not in the denigrating sense.

While it is certainly common for gay public figures to be criticized for what they say, there is no safety in silence. In an interview in popular LGBTQ magazine *The Advocate*, actor Chris Colfer, who plays Kurt, responded to a question about whether he was out in high school by saying, "Oh, no. People are killed in my hometown for that" ("Just one of the Guys"). Later, he told the very mainstream *USA Today*: "I try to keep up a mystery. As much as I give away of my personal life, the less people will believe me as other characters. I try to be private about it. It is what it is" (Freydkin). The *Advocate* followed up its interview with a piece titled "*Glee's* Chris Colfer Not Out After All?" suggesting that he had gone back into the closet⁸: These interviews give the impression that Colfer's self presentation is largely directed by a desire to offend as few people as possible in each given context. Hence, he can be open about his sexual identity in the gay press, but chooses not to discuss it at all in the mainstream media. However, no matter what he says, he offends either homophobic readers--and, potentially, casting agents-- or those gay and gay-friendly readers who believe that consistent outness is the only outness that counts. Ironically, Colfer is criticized for failing to live up to the very model that his character on *Glee* serves to embody.

Great Straits

While Colfer appears to satisfy no one in his attempts to please everyone, another of the show's young actors seems to please the gay press no matter what he says. I examine two interviews with Darren Criss, who plays Blaine, Kurt's love interest, in gay media texts: the first is with Brett Berk, author of *Vanity Fair's* online column "A Gay Guide to *Glee*," and the second is in the March 2011 issue of gay male magazine *Out*, which features Criss on the cover. In both

⁸ (http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily_News/2009/11/11/Glee_Chris_Colfer_Not_Out_After_All/).

interviews, the actor responds to questions about his own, as well as his character's, sexuality.

In *Vanity Fair*, he said:

for the longest time when people asked me about Blaine, I wanted to say It doesn't matter. And it doesn't. But I don't want to devalue it, because it's a very earnest question, and I can see why people would want to know. And I realized that if I said, *It doesn't matter*, that immediately means that I'm gay. So I do define myself as a straight male, but it really doesn't come into play with me in this role.

For something that does not matter, Criss talks about his heterosexuality a lot. In *Out*, he took this response a step further, giving it a political resonance: "I think it's more empowering to everyone, including myself, if I'm articulate about identifying myself as a straight male playing a gay character. Ultimately, that's more powerful for both communities" ("Darren Criss The New Kid on the Block"). Comments such as these have made Criss immensely popular in the gay mainstream. In May 2011, he was featured at the top of afterelton.com's Hot 100 list, comprised of actors, musicians, athletes and other celebrities selected and ranked by frequenters of the gay male website affiliated with the LGBT-centric television network, LOGO. (afterelton.com 2011 Hot 100 Results). Criss is one of only two men in the top ten not described as being openly gay, which begs the question, what advantage can he possibly have over male celebrities who have taken the risk of coming out as gay? Certainly, it did not hurt that Criss is young and beautiful, but I would argue that his eagerness to speak for both gay and straight "communities," coupled with his role on *Glee*, embodies the ideals of the new homonormativity in imagining that gay equality with straights has already been achieved.

This notion that equality can be achieved by straight men coming out as such, and playing the love interests of gay characters on network television shows, is an attractive idea, but is ultimately misleading. If this were the case, not only would Criss not have to "out" himself, in a way so calculated to please both gay and straight audiences, he would not have been asked the questions that compel this performance in the first place. Moreover, Criss's comments suggest a troubling obliviousness to the privileges he enjoys as a straight man, even as he clings to them. As theorist Devon W. Carbado argues "the disparate social meanings that attach to gay and lesbian identities [stigma] on the one hand and straight identities [normalcy] on the other is what makes individual acts of heterosexual signification a cause for concern"(201). While Carbado argues that declaring one's heterosexual orientation can be helpful as "a way to position oneself in a discourse so as not to create the (mis)impression of gay authenticity," Criss actually presents his heterosexuality as that which, coupled with his assumed gay-friendliness--he grew up in San Francisco, doing musical theatre, as both interviews reveal--allows him to speak to what is empowering for "both [gay and straight] communities (201). By presenting coming out as something both gays and straights have to do, Criss obscures the fact that, outside of gay friendly cities like San Francisco, it is gays, not straights, who need to be empowered.

In spite of, and, perhaps, because of, this disturbing naivete, it is easy to see why the writers of the *Out* article call Criss "an ideal spokesperson for an new generation of all American male--comfortable enough with his own sexuality to be perfectly at ease with someone else's"("Darren Criss The New Kid on the Block"). I would argue that this is an equally apt description of the kind of straight man that *Glee* often presents and that the writers imagine as

making up the audience to which this show is addressed. What is especially interesting here is that the correlation of being "at ease" with the sexuality of the gay other is dependant on "comfort with [one's] own sexuality." The suggestion is that the problem in gay-straight relations is not a question of privilege, who has it versus who does not, but rather of certainty versus ambivalence. By this logic, the more heterosexual one is, the less likely one is to feel threatened by those who are sexually different; this erases not only the problem of heterosexual privilege, but of heterosexual homophobia. *Glee* devotes a tremendous amount of time to stressing straight men's comfort with their sexuality, but is very far from presenting gay characters as comfortable with their own sexuality.

The first time *Glee* deals with gay sexuality, as opposed to gay identity, is in season one when Kurt develops a crush on Finn, the male lead of New Directions, who is straight. After Kurt encourages his father and Finn's mother to date, as part of his plan to get closer to Finn, they decide to combine households, and the two boys begin sharing a bedroom ("Theatricality"). Finn is uncomfortable with this arrangement because he realizes that Kurt is attracted to him, but he keeps this reason hidden until he finally explodes at Kurt in a tirade that ends with his calling the furnishings Kurt has chosen for their room "faggy." The tension escalates when Kurt claims not to understand why these furnishings have upset Finn so much. "You know," Finn says ominously, but then he becomes more explicit: "I've seen the way you look at me [. . .] I put my underwear on in the shower when I know you're here." I will return to what Finn says, but first I am interested in what the preceding silence reveals about him. Why could Finn not have simply told Kurt that he was straight, that he was uncomfortable with this attention, or told Kurt's father? I want to suggest that this scene explores the problem of

masculine anxiety as well as homophobia. Finn does not avow his heterosexuality because the privilege he has experienced prior to this situation has convinced him that he should not have to, that his heterosexuality should go without saying. To "come out" as straight would, as Edelman has it, subject him to "the alienating requirement that [he] be read"(12). To "textualize" his heterosexuality would be to admit the possibility on which Kurt is basing his hopes, that Finn could, potentially, be something else. Of course, Finn is not gay, but Kurt's presence is an everyday reminder to him that there are possibilities for men other than heteromascularity, that this paradigm does not naturally go without saying.

However, before the episode ends, Finn finds a more attractive way to textualize his heterosexuality, ironically, by defending Kurt. When Kurt, who has been taunted throughout this episode for dressing too flamboyantly, is cornered by two football players in the boy's bathroom, Finn comes to his rescue donning a dress made from a red shower curtain. While the audience wonders if this is the same curtain behind which Finn hid his vulnerable straight body from Kurt's lecherous gay gaze, Finn announces that he has learned his lesson, about calling people names, and now he is determined to not let his teammates physically assault Kurt. The distinction between kinds of injury is very important as it distinguishes the "real" homophobes from those who are simply "ignorant," like Finn. Finn learns his lesson not from Kurt but from a fellow reformed homophobe, Kurt's father, Burt. Conveniently missing most of Finn's tirade, Burt comes to his son's defense when he overhears Finn call Kurt "faggy" ("Theatricality"). While Kurt is so clueless that he actually tries to defend Finn--"I didn't take it like that"--Burt pushes aside semantics to get to the heart of the matter. He tells his son, "you're sixteen, and you still see the good in people. When you get a little older, you start to

see the hate in people's hearts." Burt is able to elucidate the true meaning of homophobic language because, as one who was homophobic in his youth, he is now an adult and the father of a gay son, while Kurt, who is merely a victim of homophobia, cannot understand it. This is the first of many examples that fit Becker's "helpful heterosexual" trope on *Glee*; we see growth and change for both of the straight male characters, but Kurt serves only as a catalyst for these developments. My purpose in examining this episode in such detail is to show how quickly and easily one can slip from homophobic to helpful, and back again.

The fact that Burt is clearly presented as a supportive father throughout all three seasons does not prevent him from articulating a sugar coated version of the gay panic defense in season two. This comes about after Kurt asks Sam, a new edition to New Directions, to sing a duet with him ("Duets"). Finn intervenes in an attempt to protect Sam, telling Kurt, "the way you were all over me last year, if I did that to a girl she'd take out a restraining order [. . .] I have issues with the fact that you don't understand that no means no." Finn uses his memory to explicitly position himself as a feminized victim of sexual harassment, just as the homosexual panic defense has evolved, Becker tells us, to put the blame on the gay victims' advances rather than the straight defendant's confusion, paranoia, and violence. Finn's self-defense is as homophobic here as it was in "Theatricality" when he feared Kurt would assault him in the shower; he clearly has not grown that much. However, when Kurt tells his father what Finn said, the following exchange ensues:

Burt : I was talking to Carol, and you weren't completely honest with me. She told me that you had a crush on Finn, and that you weren't afraid to show it. Is that true?"

Kurt: Oh, sure. Any time a gay guy tries to be friendly to a straight guy he's seen as a sexual predator.

Burt: A lot of guys just don't know how to deal with unwanted sexual advances.

Burt concedes that Finn should not have called Kurt names, but he also recognizes Finn's fears as warranted. He even accuses Kurt of "trying to push this kid, Sam, around because you're interested in him." Unfortunately, gay teenagers do have to be careful how they express their attractions because of their vulnerability to harassment and violence, but what is troubling about this episode is that, for Finn and Burt, the most articulate characters, the reason is not that Kurt needs to protect himself, but that straight boys must be protected from him.

Throughout the remainder of season two and season three, Kurt appears to have internalized this view of his sexuality. He has great difficulty communicating his desires to Blaine even well into their relationship. I want to suggest that the reason for this reticence is that Kurt's dialogue with the two people he respects and admires the most make an explicit connection between gay male sexual desire and humiliation. As I will show later, most expressions of such desire on the show lead to humiliation, which is always presented as being deserved, never as a consequence of homophobia.

While a significant part of Kurt's intelligibility is that he learns that his desires are potentially damaging to their objects and himself, Finn never comes to any such self understanding. In fact, he repeats the homophobe/helpful heterosexual cycle twice more. In "Furt," after refusing to make a stand with the other straight boys in the glee club to protect Kurt from Dave Karofsky, a closeted gay bully, and one of the football players who harassed Kurt in "Theatricality," Finn makes a speech at his and Kurt's parents' wedding, promising to

protect his new stepbrother "no matter what it costs me." Not only is this speech explicitly self-serving--it is as much intended to reassert his leadership of the glee club as to repair his relationship with Kurt--it is spoken in an entirely risk-free context, in front of Kurt and Finn's families and best friends, and Finn is never called upon to fulfill his promise. In season 3, Finn outs Santana, the show's sole lesbian character, in a crowded hallway and then, suddenly fearful of her potentially committing suicide in the following episode, he encourages the members of New Directions to serenade her with songs by and about women to show their support ("Mash Off" and "I Kissed a Girl"). The fact that the recipients of Finn's sudden support immediately forgive him suggests that we are meant to take his bouts of generosity at face value. He really does value his gay and lesbian friends; he is simply forgetful. These incidents suggest that homophobia is really only an abiding problem for gays and lesbians. For well-meaning straight people, any failure of support for, or active harm to, gay people can easily be redressed through a contrasting supportive action, with no need to question or examine the reasons behind the first.

Glee not only privileges straight's feelings but also their knowledge of all sexualities. When the show was selected as the post Super Bowl special in February 2011, the writers immediately began to think of ways to appeal to a segment of the population not typically drawn to musical comedies: straight male pro football fans. Co-creator Brad Falchuck said, "We put stuff in there understanding that there are a lot of dudes who watch the Super Bowl. So it was making sure that the dudes who refuse to watch *Glee* are like, Wait a second!" (Stack 44). Ironically, or perhaps not, the episode also includes one of the show's only jokes related to

gay sexuality in a scene involving gay characters.⁹ When Kurt and Blaine are discussing the game McKinley's High's football team is about to play. Kurt tells his friend that he knows Finn, the team's quarterback, has been feeling tense about the game:

Kurt: That's why I take a glass of warm milk to his room every night to help him sleep.

Blaine: Warm milk, really?

Kurt: It's delicious.

The deadpan expression on Kurt's face makes it perfectly clear that he has no idea that what he said could be understood as meaning that he goes to Finn's room every night to give him a blow job. Blaine, evidently, gets it, but he does not share this possible interpretation with Kurt. Why, one might ask, did the writers choose to include this exchange in an episode specifically designed to cater to straight men? Why even include these characters in an episode in which they are so remote from the central plot? Since, as Falchuck points out, the goal of this episode is to lure male viewers into reconsidering their opinion of the show generally, I would argue that this joke works to make this audience comfortable with these characters by divesting their sexuality of any potential threat. If Kurt understood the sexual implications of what he said, he would be impugning Finn's heteromascularity in an episode in which it is taken even more seriously than usual.¹⁰ Instead, the joke is on Kurt and his complete ignorance of sexual matters. Blaine's refusal to tamper with his friend's ignorance suggests that not only that he

⁹ There have been a number of other gay jokes throughout both seasons, but most are made by homophobic football players at the expense of straight glee club members who are also on the football team.

¹⁰ " This is the episode in which we learn that Kurt and Finn are living in the same house. Finn's mother marries Kurt's father in episode8, "Furt."

and Kurt are not sexually intimate, and that Blaine is actually trying to protect his friend's innocence.¹¹ Not only does this scene dispel the specter of gay male sexuality, it allows the audience to enjoy their advantage over Kurt by privileging straight males' knowledge of all sexualities. Thus, it diffuses any potential homophobia on the part of this audience by showing them that they have nothing to be phobic about.

The advantages enjoyed by straight men are equally evident in Kurt's sexual education, which he receives, almost entirely, from his father. Burt and Kurt have their first conversation about sex after Burt discovers Blaine in Kurt's bed ("Blame it on the Alcohol"). While Kurt insists that nothing happened, Burt explains that he is angry because Kurt had someone sleep over without asking his permission, but Kurt is not convinced. Finally, Burt admits, "I don't know anything about what two guys do when they're together, but I sat through that whole *Brokeback Mountain*. From what I gather, something went down in the tent" confirming Kurt's suspicion that Burt is angry because this situation has forced him to reckon with the thought of his gay son as a sexual being. Kurt challenges his father, saying, "maybe you should educate yourself, so if I ever have any questions I can ask my dad like any straight son would." That Kurt is able to stand up to his father and ferret out his residual homophobia seems promising, but one is left wondering why a gay teenager would want a third hand sexual education from a straight man who could, apparently, barely watch the brief sex scene in Ang Lee's film. Perhaps it is because it is only when the education is so far removed from the experience that it makes sense for a gay son to appeal to his straight father "like any straight son would."

¹¹ This is episode 11 of season two; Kurt and Blaine do not become romantically involved until episode 16.

It is well worth asking why is the gay teenagers on this show clearly require adult guidance while the straight teenagers are able to hook up, break up, and cheat on each other without their parents or other adults knowing about it, let alone interfering. "Sexy," the episode following the above conversation between Burt and Kurt, focuses on problems with sex education, or the lack thereof, in high schools, but, intriguingly, the only characters who actually receive an education are gays and lesbians. In one scene, Santana is only able to confess her love for her best friend, Brittany, after guidance from the heterosexual sex education teacher, who persuades her to sing a song with Brittany in front of the entire glee club while she accompanies them on the guitar. While for many queer teenagers, particularly closeted ones, trustworthy adults of any sexual orientation may be in short supply, this scene makes the disturbing suggestion that heterosexuals' acceptance is as important as self-acceptance. In the next section, I show that not only does the show present heterosexuals as authorities on all sexuality, it presents heterosexuality itself as the norm against which all sexualities can be measured. Over the course of *Glee*'s first two seasons, Burt indicates that, for him, a gay son who has no interest in sex may be the next best thing to a son who is interested in girls.¹² Indeed, the sex talk that he gives Kurt in "Sexy" is as much about heterosexual men and women as about gay boys. Perhaps because it is a one-size-fits-all sexual education, this conversation has been praised by many commentators as the outstanding moment of the episode. Even Brett Berk calls it "surprisingly not awkward" ("The Gay Guide to Glee, Episode 15). I discuss this talk at length because it gives clear insights into the show's sexual and gendered ideologies. More than any other scene, it affirms heterosexism to its logical

¹² In season one episode Laryngitis, Burt tells Kurt "I always wanted to talk to you about girls."

conclusion: that the best that can be said for homosexuality is that it is the same as heterosexuality, but where the two differ, it is the heterosexual norm that is natural and healthy.

Burt presents sex to his son through a discourse of gender essentialism, labeling men as physical and women as emotional in a way that casts both sexes in an unflattering light:

Burt: For most guys, sex is something we always want to do. It's fun, it feels great, and we don't really think about what it's doing to us on the inside or how the other person feels.

Kurt: Women are different?

Burt: Only because they understand the emotional stuff, that it's about more than just sex. I can't tell you how many buddies of mine have gotten in way too deep with a girl who said she was cool with just hooking up.

Kurt: But, that's not going to happen to me, Dad

Burt : No, for you, it's going to be worse, because it's going to be two guys. Then you have two people who think sex is just sex. It's going to be easier to find it, and once you start doing this stuff, you're not going to want to stop.

Burt's speech is striking in its succinctness; within just a few sentences, we learn that men are selfish and only concerned with having orgasms, that women are emotionally manipulative and use sex to ensnare men, and that gay men are sex-obsessed and promiscuous. The only pairing left out are lesbians, which makes some sense given the model's presentation of desire and

emotion as binary opposites; why would people completely driven by their emotions be having sex with each other anyway?¹³ Content aside, what is most disturbing about this talk is the fact that there is no place in this model for his son. In spite of his description of gay men as promiscuous, he tells Kurt, "don't throw yourself around like you don't matter," presenting Kurt's sense of self worth as bound up in the number of people he has sex with. If, in the heterosexist model Burt describes, men and women are very different halves that make up a whole, where do Kurt and Blaine fit in? Once the two boys become a couple, the topic of sex is never broached again until season three. Instead of using Burt's speech as a starting point for answering the question of what a safe, romantic, emotional, *sexual* relationship between gay teenagers might be like, the writers ultimately posit it as an end in itself. Even in the third season, in which Kurt and Blaine actually have sex, the writers struggle and, I argue, ultimately fail to present gay sex in a positive light. This failure has much to do with the show's privileging of romance, which it presents as irrevocably linked to chastity. Yet Kurt's chastity is, coupled with the fact that he is out to everyone he knows, what gives him his privileged position within the show. While season two is devoted to Kurt's education about his place in the mainstream sexual hierarchy the show endorses, season three is devoted to Kurt's role as the model against which all of *Glee's* gay teenagers are measured.

"The First Time"

¹³ The single lesbian character who has been on the show at this point, Santana, describes regularly making out with her best friend, Brittany, when the two went on dates with boys in season one, but after Santana confessed her feelings for Brittany in season two, they have barely touched each other apart from one chaste hug ("Prom Queen"). As with Kurt and Blaine, their relationship becomes strictly emotional.

In season three, we see the final product of Kurt's process of intelligibility and the education he receives from heterosexuals, both adults and his peers. It is in an episode appropriately titled, "The First Time," that we first see Kurt as the gay sexual subject against whom three others are read: Blaine, Sebastian, a new edition to *The Warblers* who wants to have sex with Blaine, and Kurt's former persecutor, Dave Karofsky. This episode represents the writers' attempt to valorize gay sex, when it takes place within the context of a long term, monogamous relationship. According to Michael Warner, the gay and lesbian movement has often divided itself into "pro-sex" and "anti-sex," pro-romance, camps: "the implication tends to be that those who favor sex, especially casual sex, are opposed by those who favor romantic love"(73). He adds, however, that "queer culture should be the last place where this opposition should be taken for granted. One of its greatest contributions to modern life is the discovery that you can have both"(73). Warner explains that queer ethics permit individuals to choose both long term romantic commitments and casual sex with people outside the relationship, but within *Glee's* ethic, sex within a relationship is an extraordinary event, and sex outside of a relationship is nothing less than reprehensible.

Beginning in season two, Kurt is the kind of figure Warner argues has been used in gay politics to combat discrimination. Through him, the show can "challenge the stigma of sexual identity without in the least challenging the shame of sexual acts"(29). While Kurt's sexual ignorance is played up in the post-Super Bowl episode, it becomes a crucial part of his character in "Sexy," in which he describes himself as "hav[ing] all the sexual appeal and knowledge of a baby penguin." From an anti-homophobic perspective, it is easy to relate his ignorance to a

dearth of gay adults from whom he might receive an education.¹⁴ Yet, while *Glee*'s gay and lesbian teenagers are not fortunate in their adult acquaintances, they are not entirely passive. In "Sexy," both Kurt and Blaine admit to having sought out information about sex; Blaine found information browsing the internet, while Kurt, apparently with great trepidation, perused gay pornography. Seen in a positive light, these confessions do serve the purpose of acquainting the show's gay teen viewers with the information possibilities available to them. However, another function of these exchanges is to reaffirm straight male authority at the expense of queer experience.

Kurt tells Blaine that when he tried to watch "those movies" they made him depressed because he "kept thinking [the actors] were children once, and they had mothers, and did their mothers know what they were doing"("Sexy"). Kurt seems anxious to stress how very far he was from being turned on by what he saw, but, in spite of his prudishness, he does reveal some curiosity about sex--he most likely did not stumble across gay porn while doing homework. However, he is extremely cautious about who he allows to educate him. While he chooses to watch porn, he also chooses not to see it as a source of information. When Blaine offers to "tell [Kurt] what [he] know[s]," Kurt asks him to leave, but later listens attentively as Burt explains the difference between men and women. What all the sources Kurt rejects have in common, and which seems to disqualify them, is that they point to the reality of gay sex rather than an abstract, straight-friendly view of it. His rejection of queer sources not only reaffirms the

¹⁴ In fact, Blaine brings up this point in his talk with Burt during this episode, pointing out that high-school sex education courses often do not address gay sexuality.

show's privileging of a hetero-sexual educational model as the best for gay and straight teens alike, it also posits Kurt as an ideal gay teenager, from an adult straight male perspective.

Kurt's dialogue in "The First Time" shows very little change from season two. Early in the episode, he asks if Blaine thinks he's sexually boring: "we have been playing it very safe by not granting our hands Visas to travel below the equator." The writers clearly find it very important to clarify for the audience just how much Kurt and Blaine have *not* done physically in their relationship of almost a year. Blaine says, "I thought that was what we wanted," then nonchalantly mentions masturbation to explain why he is not impatient to have sex with Kurt. Kurt gets extremely uncomfortable, and he asks Blaine to open a window. Chris Colfer's delivery of these lines makes it unclear whether Kurt is excited or disgusted by Blaine's confession. His asking Blaine if he ever wants to "rip each other's clothes off and get dirty" shows some progress from his declaration in "Sexy" that he "likes Hollywood musicals because the touch of fingertips is as sexy as it gets," but the fact of physical sexuality clearly still upsets him. This becomes more evident later, when he describes a fantasy on his "bucket list:" "have relations on a dewy meadow of lilacs with Taylor Lautner before he gets fat."¹⁵ The fact that the object of Kurt's desire is sandwiched between a lovingly detailed setting and a pessimistic prognostication about his attractiveness suggests again that Kurt's interest in a highly romanticized view of sexuality is indivisible from a sense of disgust with actual bodies.

Sebastian, on the other hand, is almost wholly defined by the fact that he has a lot of sex with a lot of different boys and men. In the first scene he shares with Kurt and Blaine, he

¹⁵ Taylor Lautner plays a werewolf in the blockbuster teenage romance films based on Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series.

confesses that he broke up with "the man of [his] dreams [. . .] about twenty minutes after [they] met" at a gay bar called Scandals, which the three of them visit later in the episode ("The First Time"). I would argue that Sebastian's promiscuity establishes him as season three's villain from his first scene. The first thing we learn about Sebastian is that he is very sexually confident. When Blaine visits Dalton and meets him for the first time, Sebastian tells Blaine that he has gathered from other students at the all male school that "Blaine Anderson [. . .] is sex on a stick and sings like a dream" and later asks him if he transferred to McKinley "because you got tired of all the preppies, or was it because you broke too many hearts to stay." These comments work not only to let Blaine know that Sebastian is attracted to him, but to remind Blaine of all the admiration, and perhaps more, that he left behind to be with a person who now needs constant affirmation and reassurance from him. For a moment, Sebastian makes promiscuity look like an attractive option. However, the scene is punctuated by the New Directions performance of "A Boy Like That," a song from the musical *West Side Story* in which a young woman warns her sister about a boy who is only interested in her for sexual pleasure, and will abandon her afterwards. During this performance, we see Blaine and Sebastian talking and laughing together, but, when the music stops, their conversation ends with Blaine accepting Sebastian's suggestive invitation to meet again: "I could really use some more insights from you, Blaine. Warbler to Warbler." Throughout this episode, Blaine is positioned as having to make a choice between Kurt's version of romance and Sebastian's version of sexual adventure. The audience, however, is not permitted to make a choice. The audio of the song that persists throughout the scene makes it difficult to read Sebastian's sexual interest in Blaine as anything but a threat.

In "The First Time," Blaine is poised between two extremes of gay male sexual identity, but *Glee* has featured a strict binary of sexual choices from its beginning. The scene between Blaine and Sebastian is hardly the first time gay male sexual advances have been posited as a threatening to their objects on this show. In addition to Finn's charges against Kurt in seasons one and two, Sandy, the only gay adult for most of the show, describe himself as "predatory gay" while in the midst of hitting on a man who has just described himself as straight ("Night of Neglect").¹⁶ The first of the very few male-male kisses on the show is forced on Kurt by Dave, who later threatens to kill him if he tells anyone, in season two ("Never Been Kissed" and "The Substitute"). The only sexual advance made on one male by another that is not presented as predatory occurs when Blaine kisses Kurt after months of passive expectation on Kurt's part, and this only occurs after Blaine is criticized for making sexual advances towards other people ("Original Songs").

The first of these advances takes place in a season two episode called "Silly Love Songs." Blaine asks the Warblers, which include Kurt at this point, to help him serenade a junior manager at the GAP on whom he has a crush. This performance that follows can perhaps best be described as aggressive; Blaine chases the boy he likes, Jeremiah, around his workplace, singing a seductive and fairly explicit song.¹⁷ All Blaine gets, however, is a list of "don'ts" concerning gay male courtship delivered by Jeremiah, who is fired from his job immediately after this incident. We learn that gay boys should not out others ("I just got fired . . . no one here knows I'm gay"), should not make assumptions ("Let's be clear, we got coffee twice. We're

¹⁶ Rachel's two gay dads are featured in two episodes in season three, "Heart" and "On My Way"(double check), but, interestingly, they never share a scene with Kurt and Blaine or any of the other gay characters.

¹⁷ Robin Thicke "When I Get You Alone" which includes lyrics such as "making dogs wanna beg/braking them off your fancy legs [. . .] you can keep your toys in the drawer tonight."

not dating), and should not pursue older men ("if we were, I'd be arrested because you're underage") ("Silly Love Songs"). It seems ironic when, later in this episode, Blaine confesses to Kurt, "I act like I know what I'm doing, but I don't. The truth is, I've never been anyone's boyfriend before [. . .] I'm not very good at romance. "The way in which Blaine describes his humiliating rejection by Jeremiah as a failed attempt at romance belies the blunt eroticism and sexual confidence he expresses in performing it, but it also makes Blaine redeemable within *Glee's* sexual ethic. Sebastian, who actually is interested in sex, is posited as beyond redemption for as long as this association remains.

When Blaine actually does something sexual, drunkenly making out with Rachel, one of Kurt's girlfriends, at a party, he receives another lecture from Kurt. After Blaine confesses that he thinks he might be bisexual, Kurt tells him, "'bisexual' is a word boys in high school use when they want to hold hands with a girl and feel normal," adding that he is disappointed with Blaine for "creep[ing] back in[to the closet]" when Kurt looks up to him ("Blame it on the Alcohol"). While Blaine does defend himself, Kurt is later proven right when Rachel kisses Blaine sober, proving that Blaine is "definitely gay"("Blame it on the Alcohol"). It is largely through his relationship with Blaine the Kurt is established as a model gay teenager. I would argue that Blaine's choices represent his attempts to shape his own intelligibility, but Kurt's corrections push him into the kind of restrictive process Susan Talburt describes in "Intelligibility and Queer Youth"(18). Kurt's guidance is consistently reinforced by the fact that when Blaine takes steps towards sexual pleasure, he is humiliated or proven wrong, while when he moves towards a strictly romantic viewpoint, he is rewarded.

This is never more evident than in "The First Time," in which the couple attempts to have their "first time" twice; the first initiated by Blaine, the second by Kurt. The first takes place after Kurt and Blaine agree to meet Sebastian at Scandals where Blaine spends much of the night dancing with Sebastian. At the end of the night, as Kurt attempts to put Blaine, who is tipsy, in the back seat of his car, Blaine grabs Kurt and tries to pull him in on top of him, saying, "let's just do it." Given that Blaine was happy to wait before meeting Sebastian, and now wants to have sex with his boyfriend after spending an evening dancing with someone else, it is easy to see why Kurt refuses this offer; he shouts, "I've never felt less like being intimate with anyone in my life!" However, later in the episode, after the two make up and kiss chastely, Kurt says, "take me to your house." Kurt decides that sex is a way to mend the tear in their relationship caused by Sebastian's attempt to seduce Blaine, but this does nothing to change the association of sex with Sebastian rather than the couple's desire for each other. His pressure is the impetus behind the successful attempt as much as the unsuccessful one. This becomes clear as the remaining seventeen episodes of the season pass without any reference to the couple's sex life, barring one confession that Kurt makes to Rachel that he and Blaine have not had "an unscheduled make out session in months," because they are going through "lesbian bed death," several months after Sebastian's departure from the show ("Dance With Somebody").

The fact that Kurt and Blaine do have sex seems to indicate a change from the show's phobic representation of gay sexuality in season two, but Sebastian remains the only gay male

character in whose storyline sex plays a significant role.¹⁸ Although he violates *Glee*'s ethics in many ways with his racism, classism, and violence, he is only attacked by others for his sexuality. At the end of a battle of insults, Kurt tells Sebastian he "smells like Craig's List," an internet site featuring various goods for sale that some gay men use to find casual sex, and, after Sebastian temporarily blinds Blaine by throwing a slushy filled with rock salt in his face, Santana makes the suggestion "that we drag him, bound and gagged, to a tattoo parlor for a tramp stamp that reads 'tips appreciated' or 'congratulations, you're my one thousandth customer' ("Michael"). One could argue that casual sex is actually season three's villain and Sebastian is merely its representative, particularly given that Sebastian enjoys some redemption before his departure from the show, while sex for pleasure never does.

The Closet.

Sebastian's assault on Blaine takes place when the New Directions confront the Warblers for stealing their idea for a future competition, an idea Sebastian learned about by calling Blaine, unbeknownst to Kurt. The fact that Blaine is temporarily blinded as a result of being metaphorically blind to Sebastian's malevolence is too apt to not read as a punishment for, once again, failing to listen to Kurt, who has mistrusted Sebastian from the beginning. While Sebastian is clearly a villain, *Glee* insists upon a redemptive moment for everyone, and this is one of the few ways in which this increasingly dramatic show clings to its definition as a comedy. Sebastian's comes in "On My Way" as each of the show's characters reacts to Dave

¹⁸ Brittany and Santana's sexuality is far more visible, but only in contexts that are at least semi-public, as when Brittany posts their sex tape on the internet and several boys make comments to Santana about it ("Heart"). Both characters also continue to be defined by their previous promiscuity (with boys) in previous seasons, even though they are a couple throughout most of season three.

Karofsky's suicide attempt. Dave had asked Sebastian at Scandals how he could get guys to like him, and Sebastian responded by telling Dave he should lose weight, stop waxing his eyebrows, and "just stay in the closet." Sebastian, transformed by guilt after he hears the news, gives up his pursuit of Blaine and his attempts to win the upcoming competition between the New Directions and the Warblers by dishonest means, and takes up a collection for anti-bullying charities at the same competition. This is also the only episode featuring Sebastian in which his promiscuity is never mentioned. The extremity of this character's turn around can best be explained by the fact that the closet is the one feature of gay life that the show presents as even more despicable than sex. There are, obviously, important differences in the show's treatment of these two features. I have argued that *Glee* does not condemn all gay sex, but its requirements for what constitutes acceptable sex are so restrictive that it condemns sexual activity and even seduction attempts far more often than it validates them. On the other hand, the show never presents being in the closet as a valid choice under any circumstances. In some respects, this is understandable. As Eve Sedgwick argues, "there are risks in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet in a historical narrative that does not have as a fulcrum a saving vision--whether located in past or future--of its apocalyptic rupture"(*The Epistemology of the Closet* 68). *Glee* certainly presents such a vision, but, unlike Sedgwick, it places the sole responsibility for this rupture on gay people. What is problematic about *Glee's* representation of this structure is its sense that it is maintained by gays and lesbians' fear rather than heterosexuals' bigotry.

Dave attempts suicide after a student from the school to which he has transferred sees him with Kurt--whom Dave has begun pursuing romantically--at a restaurant on Valentine's

Day, and tells everyone that he is gay. After being attacked verbally at school and on his Facebook profile, Dave attempts to hang himself, and is saved just in time by his father. Given that Dave is outed after being seen with Kurt only a few episodes after Blaine is nearly blinded by a slushy that Sebastian had intended for Kurt, one could gather the impression that Kurt is the most dangerous gay character on the show. However, this impression is discouraged by the fact that Kurt's complete and unequivocal exit from the closet is the model of "outness" against which every other gay or lesbian character is judged. When Kurt visits Dave in the hospital during his recovery, Dave tells him, "I made your life a living hell for months. When the same thing happened to me, I couldn't take it for a week"("On My Way"). This statement posits Dave as both weak and, to some extent, deserving of what has happened to him. However, Kurt and Dave's coming out experiences could not be more different. The most obvious difference is that Kurt came out by his own choice while Dave was forced out against his will; this is what makes possible Kurt's status as hero while Dave and Santana are forced out of the closet as punishment. Kurt also has the benefit of support from heterosexuals both at his school and in his home, and it is heterosexuals, for the most part, who carry out the punishment of those who choose to remain closeted. Finn outs Santana in a crowded hallway after she delivers a barrage of insults about his weight and lack of talent ("Mash Off"). Although he clearly does so vindictively, in the next episode, he tells her he feels sorry for her because she's hiding who she is and "hurting inside"("I Kissed a Girl"). According to Finn, everyone at the school already knows that she is a lesbian and no one cares, which comes as surprise given that almost every episode makes some allusion to the adversity Kurt has overcome as an openly gay boy at the same school. Either the writers are suggesting that lesbianism is more socially acceptable than

male homosexuality, or the audience is meant to believe that Kurt has, singlehandedly, transformed McKinley High School into a more gay-friendly place. While there is nothing new about the emphasis on coming out in anti-homophobic rhetoric, *Glee* focuses such intense pressure on gay teenagers to work to change straights' minds that it denies straights any culpability in their own homophobia.

There is no better example of this pressure than the fact that the most homophobic character on the show is a closeted gay teenager. Dave harasses Kurt in season one, threatens to kill him in season two, and is comforted by Kurt when tries to kill himself in season three. If we read Dave's trajectory through his encounters with Kurt, it seems indicative of little besides internalized homophobia and desperation. What this view ignores, however, is the fact that Dave makes enormous progress between seasons two and three through his contact with queer people besides Kurt. When Santana finds out that Dave is gay, she offers to be his "beard" and involves him in her campaign for prom queen, which includes his acting as a personal body guard for Kurt between classes ("Prom Queen"). Although this is largely self-serving on her part, it is the first time someone recognizes and accepts the identity Dave has struggled to keep hidden. In the same episode, he apologizes to Kurt for his behavior earlier that year, and Kurt forgives him, but is not satisfied. At the end of the episode, when Dave and Kurt are crowned prom king and queen, Kurt tells him to "Do it. Come out now." Dave panics and leaves, and we do not see him again until Kurt encounters him at Scandals in "The First Time." At the bar, Dave says, "people like me here, I feel accepted," and then he tells Kurt that he's embraced his identity as a bear cub, because he's "burly." Throughout this scene, Kurt makes no effort to hide his disappointment that Dave transferred to a new school to avoid

having to come out, and while he says he is not judging Dave, his comment "I'm all for being whoever you have to be at your own speed" implies that Dave still has a long way to go to be acceptable by Kurt's standards. In these scenes, we see that Dave has found a means of intelligibility that is comfortable for him, but it does not match the model that *Glee* promotes through Kurt. I would argue this lack of approval has much to do with the site of Dave's intelligibility. While Kurt becomes intelligible through his relationship with his father and the straight members of New Directions, Dave becomes intelligible first through his friendship with a closeted lesbian and then through his visits to Scandals, a site of under-aged drinking, casual sex, and Drag Queen Wednesdays. All of these features place Scandals on the fringes of society, and this explicit contradiction of the new homonormativity, with its principles of respectability and assimilation, makes it unacceptable as a site of intelligibility, regardless of the fact that Dave feels liked and accepted there. It is interesting given that Scandals is never mentioned as a place in which Dave might seek comfort after he is outed; the only scene that takes place there in "On My Way" is the one in which Sebastian, who is clearly not his friend, insults him. Instead, he calls Kurt, who had refused his romantic advances in the previous episode and refuses to take his calls in this one. However, far from reproaching Kurt, Dave listens with great pleasure to Kurt's prescription for his future happiness, which is set ten years in the future and includes a romantic life partner and a son. The vision Kurt narrates might best be described as the new homonormative American Dream. I would argue that Dave acceptance of this vision constitutes his redemptive moment not only for this episode but this season; like Sebastian, he is never seen again. Every episode of *Glee* contains platitudes about self-acceptance and the importance of being part of an accepting group, but no minority group is

subject to more scrutiny concerning the process of their self-acceptance or placed under more pressure to be acceptable to others than gay teenagers.

Conclusion

Ryan Murphy has described *Glee* as "a show that encourages all viewers no matter their sexual orientation to go after their hopes and dreams and not be pigeonholed by dated and harmful rhetoric." If one measures a show's success by the size and diversity of its audience, *Glee* has been very successful indeed. However, it is impossible for any television show, or ideological platform, to always both reassure straight people and empower gay people at the same time. I have argued that the problem with *Glee*, and with the politics of the new homonormativity at large, is that, when faced with a decision between the two, it always advances the interests of the dominant culture. In addressing gay teenagers, *Glee* advocates models of intelligibility that pressure them to make their sexual identities public and thus open to the vulnerability and even danger of exiting the closet, but critically restrict the ways in which these identities may be enjoyed. At the same time, it presents heterosexual gay-friendliness as largely a matter of "rhetoric," expressing the correct sentiments while avoiding the bad words. Placing such intense pressure on the first group, and such light responsibilities on the second, simply mirrors a cultural hierarchy in which gays and lesbians already have more struggles than straights.

The Privilege of Ignorance and Ignorance of Privilege in Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia*

Introduction:

The privileging of a straight male perspective of queer sexuality and identity in *Glee* continues a trend in American popular culture realized earlier, and, perhaps, most notoriously in Jonathan Demme's 1993 film, *Philadelphia*. The first successful mainstream film to present the topic of gay men with AIDS, *Philadelphia* was eagerly praised by some gay figures,¹⁹ but met with much hostility on the part of many others. However, director Jonathan Demme makes it clear that it was never his intention to draw an audience of activists, saying, "I'm not interested in an audience whose sympathies are already engaged" (Grimes). According to the *New York Times* article that cites these comments, the film sought an audience "whose attitude towards people with AIDS falls somewhere between indifference and mingled hostility and fear"(Grimes). While it is easy to see why this focus on an often homophobic, heterosexual audience was troubling for many gay people, who had waited a decade to see this crisis presented to a mainstream audience, more recent criticism of the film has focused on its successes rather than its shortcomings. Paul Sendziuk argues that "to remember the film as a betrayal of the community it was depicting, and not as a key moment in the wakening of mainstream America's consciousness of AIDS, would be unfair"(444). Sendziuk identifies the film's intended audience in terms of age and geography: "moms and dads who consumed films in multiplexes rather than those by independent artists and activists at gay and lesbian film festivals, and young people, straight and gay, who lived outside the 'gay ghettos' of America's capital cities"(445). Sendziuk's comments stress the niche-marketing of gay independent films

¹⁹ David Smith of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force told USA Today's Martha T. Moore that the film "conveys a very important message about the horrors of this disease"(Moore).

in contrast to the multiplex which, seemingly, is available to everyone. I would argue, however, that this film is catered to a far more specific demographic. Rather than educating a broad audience about the lives of gay people with AIDS, the film works to make this population palatable to white, straight, middle class men. While Sendzuik's point that *Philadelphia* should be valued for its role in "raising awareness and tolerance outside queer circles" is made to defend the film by appealing to the historical context in which it was produced, but I would argue that the film remains relevant today as an example of how little awareness and tolerance can accomplish alone (447). Though AIDS as a concern for white gay men has faded to the background in mainstream film and television, many of these texts continue to plead for awareness and tolerance of gays and other marginalized groups rather than taking issue with the homophobia and racial privilege that underpin ignorance and intolerance. I argue that, by refusing to address the ideologies behind mainstream audiences' indifference to these issues, these texts ultimately shore up dominant racial and sexual hierarchies rather than challenging them. Although *Philadelphia* was released in 1993, its polite critique of sexual and racial injustice, which stops short of implicating heterosexual white men as a group as beneficiaries of this injustice, continues to be the model for mainstream representations of marginalized groups.

Philadelphia advances its subtle critique by means of interpersonal relationships. Jonathan Demme was inspired to make this film by a friend, Juan Botas, who died from AIDS during its production. In the documentary "People Like Us: Making *Philadelphia*," Demme records his thought process: "I thought, we've got to keep Juan alive. Let's see, I'm a filmmaker. Film can sometimes influence the way people think." While these comments seem to illustrate

a convening of the personal and the political in the film's conception, I would argue that, in its execution, the personal stands in place of the political. While many feminist scholars argue that the personal is always political, Demme and the film's writer, Ron Nyswaner, present the relationship between white gay AIDS patient Andrew Beckett and his homophobic black lawyer Joe Miller without ever commenting on their shared marginalization, or any sense that Joe seems himself as part of any demographic besides straight male. However, Joe, like Demme, does undergo a transformation from fearing gay men and AIDS to helping a gay man with AIDS. The film seems premised upon the assumption that sympathy is a productive end in itself, regardless of whether it leads to political action. In an essay that examines the films of actor Tom Hanks, who plays Andrew in *Philadelphia*, Fred Pfiel argues that this lack of interest in politics is an important part of the new, friendly masculinity Hanks represents: "it is precisely this inattentiveness to the larger social issues at stake [. . .] this exclusive concern with private life and public relations that constellates Hanks's normative identity as an innocent, nice, American white man" (137). I would argue that this describes not only Hanks's character in *Philadelphia*, but also, apart from his race, Joe Miller, and the audience for which the film is intended. In their presumption that their audience members want to see themselves as nice and innocent with regards to their attitudes towards homosexuality and AIDS, rather than willfully ignorant, the makers of *Philadelphia* actually nurture this ignorance by making the controversial aspects of these characters disappear. In its attempts to create sympathy for gay men with AIDS, *Philadelphia* erases the historical facts that complicated views of AIDS patients as doomed and dependant on heterosexual caretakers. Also, the film erases the privileges enjoyed not only by the audience but also many people with AIDS, as white men, while at the

same time ignoring the doubly underprivileged status of those who inhabit more than one marginalized identity. Finally, I examine the ways in which the film tries, and fails, to erase the reality of gay male sexuality, which the filmmakers deem, along with the fear of AIDS, to be the source of the audience's homophobia.

Ignorances

In its portrait of the struggles gay men with AIDs endured in the 1980s and 90s, the film focuses on the body ravaged by disease in order both to inform the audience about the medical facts of AIDS and, of course, to generate sympathy for the character. Its most striking images center on Andrew Beckett's decline and death; his transformation from a healthy, vibrant lawyer with a successful career to a pale, emaciated invalid is highlighted through close-ups of his lesions and a dramatic collapse on the courtroom floor just before the conclusion of the trial. What *Philadelphia* does not inform the audience about are the ways in which gay men *live* with AIDS, the treatments, therapy, and bonding among patients that are the subject of Juan Botas' documentary film, *One Foot on a Banana Peel, the Other Foot in the Grave*, included in *Philadelphia's* special features. Indeed, there is nothing in Demme's film to dispute or even question the equation of AIDS with inevitable death. Clearly, the sympathy that the filmmakers attempt to foster for AIDS patients does not necessarily entail a desire for AIDS to be cured or even managed. In his essay "'All the Sad Young Men': AIDS and the Work of Mourning," Jeff Nunokawa suggests that sympathy for dying gay men may reflect not the absence of homophobia, but instead a different kind of homophobia within straight culture. He suggests that "the culture that watches this spectacle [of AIDS], even with, perhaps especially with

concern, regret, and grief, sees a population doomed to extinction anyway"(311-312).

According to Nunokawa, there is nothing new about this vision of the gay male population, and he credits this view as the source of several ignorances on the part of the straight population: the unnoticed "energetic and multi-fronted response of the gay community to this crisis," "the "homosexualization of AIDS," "the continued resistance to the idea that the Human Immunodeficiency virus is not uniformly fatal," and "the persistent failure to perceive HIV-related infections as things that people live with as well as die from"(312). In its failure to shed light on any these ignorances, *Philadelphia* posits the notion that any sympathy, even one that has the homophobic undertones that Nunokawa describes, is better than no sympathy. A sympathy based on the notion that gay men will become extinct may be comforting to the straight audience, but offers no hope to the group for which the filmmakers claim to be advocating.

As Nunokawa presents it, straight culture is not simply unaware of the fight against AIDS, but this struggle does not fit into what this culture already assumes about gay men. The filmmakers, on the other hand, view ignorance as personal and circumstantial. Demme says, "I respect the fear of AIDS out there because I had that [. . .] Until you know someone with AIDS, you're afraid of it, and this movie gets at that"(Schmalz). Tom Hanks, who plays Andrew Beckett, echoes this sentiment in a later interview: "this film was made for people who thought they didn't know anyone with AIDS; when they saw it, they knew someone with AIDS" ("People Like Us "). In this view, ignorance is an innocent state that can be altered simply through any exposure to a person with AIDS, even a fictional one. A similar view remains pervasive today in numerous antihomophobic texts that focus on the difference in attitudes towards gay social

issues, such as marriage and adoption, between straight people who know someone gay and those who do not. In both cases, this view is overly simple and somewhat impractical; if knowing someone gay was the cure for homophobia, young gays and lesbians would not continue to be bullied by their peers or disowned by their families. Another problem with this solution is that it presents heterosexuals as passive and innocent in their ignorance, rather than as choosing a view that allows them access to an exclusionary norm. Queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick advance the more complex view that ignorance is itself a political investment: "insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge--a knowledge that may itself [. . .] be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth--these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth"(25). Viewed in this way, heterosexuals' ignorance of gay people is part of a heteronormative regime of truth of which hatred, loathing, and fear of homosexuals is only a part. Homosexual's lives and experiences are invalidated within this view not simply because they are unknown, but because the very idea of homosexuality conflicts with a view of heterosexuality as natural, normal, healthy, and the only viable source of familial relationships that cannot conceive of any deviations. Ignorance is not the cause of homophobia, but, rather, a symptom of it.

While Sedgwick's essay on the privilege of ignorance uses as its primary example a character whose only privileged position is one maintained through ignorance,²⁰ I am interested in the specific kinds of ignorance enjoyed by those who are in privileged positions

²⁰ the heroine of Diderot's *The Nun*, a young orphan girl living in a convent, who is able to transmit information about the sex lives of the nuns to the priests in power over the convent largely because of her ignorance of sexual meaning.

compared with those against whom their ignorance is directed. The same regime of truth that privileges heterosexuality also privileges both males and whiteness and, thus, enforces ignorance of gender and racial as well as sexual discrimination. While these ignorances help to undergird the privilege enjoyed by straight white men, this regime also fosters ignorance of the very privileged positions themselves. In his study of racial privilege, *White*, Richard Dyer articulates an argument about this kind of erasure:

White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other peoples; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others are bound to fail. (9)

In this passage, Dyer constructs white people as both very active and oblivious to the consequences their actions have for people of color. Throughout this chapter, he reiterates the lack of malice on the part of whites, and this is important, not because it dismisses white ignorance as innocent, but because it allows Dyer to implicate the overwhelming majority of white people in the problems, not only those who are explicitly and consciously racist. His project, is less interested in conscious bigotry than in what those who enjoy privilege conveniently fail to notice about those who do not. Dyer does not see this failure as strategic, but his conception of whites who, refusing to acknowledge the ways in which race shapes their beliefs and dominant images, posit themselves as objective, has much in common with Sedgwick's discussion of the "cognitive and ideological apartheid surrounding homosexuality"

which ignorance helps to produce (51). Both of these ignorances illustrate the ways in which those who enjoy them erase the experiences of the underprivileged.

While Sedgwick focuses on sexuality and, to a lesser extent, gender, and Dyer on race, Kimberle Crenshaw demonstrates how these erasures are compounded in the case of those who occupy multiple underprivileged positions. In her examination of the difficulties faced by black women in anti-discrimination law, she uses a metaphor of a basement in which reside

all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical inability. These people are stacked--feet standing on shoulders--with those at the bottom disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that 'but for' the ceiling they too would be in the upper room. (219).

Crenshaw's analogy exposes not only a diversity of inequalities but the hierarchy that supports them all. Much like Dyer, she constructs those above the ceiling as well meaning, but self-interested and somewhat lazy. The correction of "some aspects of domination" of which Crenshaw speaks is a superficial one; those on top are only willing to help those whom they do not have to stoop too far to reach, who are most readily visible. The result is that the needs of those who are subject to multiple discriminations are never addressed by those in power

because, first, they have greater difficulty assimilating into the hierarchy as it is, and also because they may threaten the stability of those on top. I suggest that Crenshaw's focus on intersectionality can be applied as much to those who enjoy multiple positions of privilege as to those who are multiply marginalized, and it shows how much the privilege of some is dependant on the disadvantage of others.

The argument Crenshaw advances challenges those above the ceiling and just below it to recognize the differences and specific needs of those further down in the cultural hierarchy, a challenge that, if met, threatens the stability of the hierarchy as a whole. Movements to address single identity discrimination, as opposed to intersectional ones, often focus on similarities, hoping to obscure the groups' differences from those who are in no way disadvantaged. Cultural studies scholar Michael Bronski points out this tendency historically in the gay rights movement, specifically in what he calls the "privatization of gay sexuality:" "the gay rights movement downplayed homosexual behavior--sex--in the attempt to recast homosexual as 'normal' people. Gay sexuality was now a 'private' activity"(70). However, this strategy ultimately fails, not this time because of heterosexual ignorance, but because of what heterosexuals know about the role of sexuality in gay identity:

Heterosexuals understand that what made homosexuals homosexual was that they desired and often *had sex* with people of the same gender: this is the difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals. The gay rights movement's attempt to hide, or downplay, gay sexuality was perceived by most heterosexuals as promoting a lie. Heterosexuals *knew* that gay people were not just like straight people: what they did in

bed was antithetical to the traditional sexual and gender paradigms and values of mainstream culture, and *that* made a lot of difference. (70-71 emphasizes original).

In Bronski's argument, gay sexual activity is a source of both aversion and fantasy to straight people because it represents the promise of pleasure without the responsibility of reproduction. He stresses that it is impossible for gay people to fully assimilate into dominant cultural hierarchies because gay sexuality, by its very nature, is a threat to the dominant culture. He draws inspiration from the 1970's gay liberation "We are your worst fear. We are your best fantasy" to argue that this threat is necessary to the liberation of heterosexuals as well as homosexuals (249). Bronski's celebratory account of gay sexual difference, unfortunately, remains less popular than the assimilationist model he outlines because some gay people--namely, white, middle-class men--have reaped benefits from opportunities for assimilation that are not available to lesbians, working-class people, or people of color. In the 2000s, many scholars have called attention to the privileges enjoyed by gay white men,²¹ but, for as long as gay people have been visible in American popular culture, this demographic has enjoyed an overwhelming majority of this representation. This is probably because sexuality can be rendered invisible in ways that race and gender cannot, and it is more difficult to withhold privileges from those who most closely resemble those who enjoy full access to them. While invisibility and silence seem to go hand in hand, *Philadelphia's* characters engage in volatile debates about things that remain invisible, such as gay male sexuality, while the visible differences of race and gender remain unspoken.

Visibility and Silence

²¹ Halberstam, 2005; Cohen, 2005; Puar, 2012.

The uses that *Philadelphia* makes of visibility and invisibility assist in its packaging of a politics of tolerance for a mainstream audience. In comparison with other 1990s films dealing with discrimination,²² *Philadelphia* looks like a multiculturalism banquet; not only does it feature gays, women, and people of color as central characters, it includes a few characters that fit into more than one of these categories. In representing such a wide variety of characters and relationships, this film had many opportunities to effectively interrogate racial and sexual discrimination, but could not do so without challenging the regimes of truth in which its audience believes. Instead, the film renders gay sexuality invisible and intersectionality virtually unspoken. The filmmakers' reticence to address these topics stems, it would seem, from their commitment to avoid being political. According to Demme, the initial script he and writer Ron Nyswaner produced was "very politicized . . . we were not only aggressive, we were assaultive. There was a desire to just, like, stick AIDS in your face and say, 'Look at it, you scumbags.'(DeCurtis, "Jonathan Demme"). The final product is almost completely devoid of anger, but I would argue that, far from making it apolitical, this decision reflects a political commitment to the dominant hierarchies I have been discussing. It is intriguing that, even though the film is clearly an attempt to stand up for victims of discrimination, the film-makers consistently present anti-discrimination politics, rather than discrimination itself, as violent in interviews about the film. In some ways, the film is as much a reaction against the direct action politics of groups like ACT UP in the 1990 as against the silence and indifference these groups

²² For example, *Longtime Companion* (1989) and *Parting Glances* (1988), earlier films about AIDs, that deal exclusively with affluent white gay men.

were formed to combat.²³ *Philadelphia* is, ultimately, more interested in not scaring white, straight men than it is in helping them change the way they think about gay people and people of color.

The filmmakers are less concerned about how the film would be received by audiences among the underprivileged groups it represents. A technical advisor on the film, Tom Stoddard, predicted that "the film will be misunderstood by gays [. . .] many will go hoping to see a depiction of themselves and their friends. But this is not that film"(Grimes). This turned out to be an apt assessment; most of the harsh criticisms the film received from activists had in common attacks on the gaps between the film's representation of the lives of people with AIDS and the realities these activists experienced. Lesbian author Sarah Schulman writes that the film "stands alone as an example of heterosexual conceit and disregard for the truth," honing in specifically on its refusal to address the variety of relationships among gay people:

"Philadelphia is predicated on the idea that there is no gay community"(Stagestruck 49).

Indeed, the film's central relationship exists between Andrew Beckett and Joe Miller the straight lawyer he hires to represent him in his suit against his firm for firing him after one of the partners discovered that he had AIDS. While Sendzuik's argument that the focus on this relationship does make an antihomophobic argument in that "Miller's preconceptions of gay men do not stand the test of engaging with Beckett and witnessing his enormous capacity to

²³ Many gay organizations, in addition to the heterosexual majority, were troubled by some of ACT-UP's confrontations tactics, particularly the interruption of mass at St. Patrick's cathedral. I discuss this at greater length in Ch. 3.

give and receive love" is persuasive from a narrative standpoint, it does not explain the short shrift given to Andrew's relationships with gay people.²⁴

Activist Larry Kramer presents sentiments echoed by many in his discussion of Andrew's relationship with his longtime lover Miguel (Antonio Banderas) in his scathing review of the film published shortly after its release. Kramer is angered by the lack of physicality between the two men: "To make a movie in which 'lovers' never kiss, touch each other, or show any affection is a lie. And Middle America knows it [. . .] if for no other reason than if there's all this AIDS around, the fellows must have done something" ("Lying About the Gay 90s"). Kramer's comments provoked a direct response from Demme in an interview published in *Rolling Stone*: "When we see two men kissing, we're the products of our brainwashing--it knocks us back twenty feet. And with *Philadelphia*--I'm sorry, Larry Kramer--I didn't want to risk knocking our audience back twenty feet with images they're not prepared to see" (DeCurtis). It is clear that Demme and Kramer have very different notions of what Middle America is prepared for, but what is interesting about Demme's comments is the way in which he universalizes homophobia without even recognizing it as such. Instead of seeing this abhorrence of visions of gay male intimacy as a limitation to overcome, he views it as an unchangeable trait that must be respected, even going so far as to present straight people as needing protection from such images.

²⁴ Both Kramer and Lee Edelman discuss the fact that Andrew's most important relationships, apart from his relationship with Joe, are with his heterosexual family members. Kramer criticizes the family scenes as unrealistic given the numbers of PWAs who have fraught, or non-existent, relationships with their families ("Lying About the Gay 90's"), Edelman points out the number of babies and pregnant women at Andrew's memorial service as a "disciplinary image" used to pit reproductive futurism against the lack of a future for gay men with AIDS. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2004.

This was not the first time Demme perceived anti-homophobic politics threatening to heterosexuals. He describes himself as a victim of the gay activists who attacked his earlier award-winning film, *The Silence of the Lambs*, for its portrayal of a psychotic, transgendered villain. In one interview, he introduces this topic, saying, "I got all this unfounded abuse on [the film]"(Schmalz), and when another interviewer brought up the question of whether *Philadelphia* was in some way meant to atone for the earlier film, as many speculated, Demme replied, "Who on earth would get the shit kicked out of them and then turn around and do something nice for the people who kicked the shit out of them?"(DeCurtis). In his use of violent metaphors to describe straight men's treatment at the hands of gay activists and gay-themed films, Demme falls in line with the phenomenon of the white male as victim that theorist David Savran notes in popular culture of the 1990s. Citing debates over affirmative action, immigration, and welfare, he writes, "I believe they all represent an attempt on the part of white men to recoup the losses they have allegedly suffered at the hands of those women and persons of color who, in fact, have had to pay for the economic and social prosperity that white men have historically enjoyed"(4). In some respects, the makers and audience of a film that seeks to promote awareness and tolerance seem to have little in common with those who would reverse the progress made by civil rights movements in the late twentieth century, but all share an investment in white, straight, male privilege, whether explicitly advocating it or seemingly unaware of it. Ultimately, all of the decisions made about representations of minorities in *Philadelphia* are political, but I will show that all of these serve to shore up dominant cultural hierarchies at the expense of these minorities.

Queerness and race

While the initial activist response to the film focused on its misrepresentation of white gay men with AIDS, more recent examinations of the film has focused on its representation of race as well as sexuality. Monica B. Pearl criticizes the film for perpetuating misconceptions about AIDS, but argues that it manages to, unintentionally, "combat and confront unaccepting attitudes about race. It does this indirectly and passively, mainly through the audience's expected identification with Joe Miller in a way that erases the need for any racial identification (or disidentification)"(103). Pearl does not explain how attitudes towards race can be confronted passively, but she does suggest that the film makes "a fairly progressive representation of race" by denying that this character's race matters. Ironically, this is what the filmmakers' intended. According to Demme, when he met with Denzel Washington after the latter showed an interest in playing the character who became Joe Miller, a role originally conceived for an Italian-American actor, Demme said, "I don't think we should touch a line of dialogue or try to racialize the script in any way." Although he cannot recall who introduced the topic of race to their conversation, Demme carefully points out that Washington was very pleased with this idea. ("People Like Us"). As Richard Dyer argues, the notion that race can ever simply not matter is a hallmark of white privilege, and Demme seems aware of this on some level when he enlists the support of an African-American actor in relating his decision to not address race in the film's dialogue. However, other critics have argued that the film does, in fact, advance a sophisticated argument about race and sexuality.

Brian Carr examines *Philadelphia* in an essay that interrogates the notion that homosexuality and black masculinity are mutually exclusive. He argues that "if racialized masculinity announces itself as manifest, recognizable condition of certain bodies,

Philadelphia demonstrates [. . .] that such manifest fashioning of identity are propped on the forced exclusion of homosexuality and sexual intelligibility"(543). One of the scenes Carr cites in support of this argument is the one in which Miller encounters a young black athlete who is also a law student. Carr argues that Joe is only able to represent Andrew because of a logic in which the categories of "black masculinity" and "homosexuality" remain discreet: Joe's "black masculinity will not be unmade through proximity to Andrew's homosexuality or his diseased body. Indeed, he realizes that to *represent* Andrew is precisely not to *be* him" (539). This logic is exposed as fraudulent when the black gay student tries to pick Joe up. While this scene certainly supports Carr's claim about the film interrogation of what he calls the "epistemology of visible identity," an assumption that homosexuality, and race, must be visible, as "partial, misleading and forced"(543), he acknowledges that Joe's initial response is far from enlightened. He responds to the young man's advance by saying, "that's the kind of bullshit that makes people hate your faggoty ass." While this scene clearly provides an opportunity for Joe's, and the audience's, education, it is not clear that Joe has learned his lesson as the film never broaches this topic again. While Joe is confronted with the fact that gay men are more diverse than he originally imagined, there is no indication that he has taken the point to heart. This is one of the only scenes in which *Philadelphia* asks its audience to think about intersectional identities; far more often, it encourages its audience to indentify or sympathize, to feel for, characters that are different from themselves and each other, but fails to give a sustained voice to anyone subject to discrimination on the basis of more than one subject position.²⁵

²⁵ Characters that represent groups that are often doubly marginalized only plead on behalf of one subject position

While most discussion of race in the film centers on Miller, I am more interested in what the film does not say about race, what it leaves the audience to assume, and what it assumes about its audience. *Philadelphia*'s creators explicitly sought an audience that was straight and male, as evidenced by Jonathan Demme's remarks that he wanted to open the film with a "strong, masculine Bruce Springsteen song," and producer Ed Saxon's praise of Tom Hanks: "He's someone you want to watch the Super Bowl with" ("People Like Us"). However, what none of them ever commented on is the race(s) of the imagined audience, an omission that is as eye-opening as any of the subject positions they do discuss. Richard Dyer argues, "the sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West"(2). The presumed impartiality of whites is evident in the discourse surrounding *Philadelphia*. In "People Like Us," all of the interviewees are white American men with the exception of Denzel Washington, for whom only one brief clip from a 1993 interview is included, and Antonio Banderes, the Spanish actor who plays Miguel. Neither of these men make any comment about the film's representation of race or ethnicity, and the white men only bring up the topic of race to dismiss it in favor of something they believe to be more relevant to the content of the film.

The film's message of tolerance for diversity is similarly negotiated on white, straight, male privileging terms. While there are gay men of color in the film, they are marginal, both in the sense that they are minor characters and because their doubly-marginalized status is never

In one scene, actress Anna Devere Smith plays a black female lawyer brought forth by the plaintiff to demonstrate that Andrew's law firm has a history of discrimination. The defense attorney's argument that it is ironic that a woman who has received a promotion should accuse the firm of discrimination is rendered doubly ironic by the fact that the defense attorney is herself a woman. The fact that both characters are women eliminates the question of gender discrimination in this scene.

discussed in the film. The film-makers view the inclusion of these characters is both an asset and an obstacle. In "People Like Us: Making Philadelphia," Writer Ron Nyswaner recalls his initial response to the news that Denzel Washington had been cast in the role of Joe Miller: "but we're doing AIDS, we're doing homosexual, and now he's African-American. Is it going to seem like we're making a point?" Demme, on the other hand, says, "we didn't want to only care about the whitebread gay people; let's accept the diversity there, it will be good for us" ("People Like Us").²⁶ Nyswaner, who is gay himself, expresses a fear of racializing AIDS by acknowledging the diversity--and intersectionality--of those whose lives it impacts--but Demme's view is not as open-minded as it sounds when we consider that there is no dialogue about the race of any gay character. It is also telling that he believes including diversity will be good for "us," the makers of *Philadelphia*, not the audience, which likely included gay people of color. Unfortunately, like the activists and AIDS patients who appear in brief cameos,²⁷ the film's non-white gay characters demonstrate its inclusivity by being seen, but not heard.

In presenting race as topic of interest only for racial minorities, whom they never see the film as addressing, the filmmakers erase the lived experience of gay people of color, even as they include them in the film. At the same time, they ignore the privileges enjoyed by white gay men, particularly the ability to speak with authority about their status as victims of discrimination. Although Miguel is portrayed by a Spanish actor and may best be described as a white Latino, his ethnic and national "otherness" in relation to the other characters racializes him within the context of this film. When we first meet this character, he becomes enraged

²⁶ Ironically, *Philadelphia* was in part inspired by the story of Clarence Cain, an African American lawyer sued his firm (Nero, 59).

²⁷ Michael Callen, an AIDS activist, and Quentin Crisp, an actor and author, appear briefly at the party that Andrew and Miguel throw before the trial begins.

with a white doctor whom he believes is trying to pressure Andrew into a painful and perhaps unnecessary colonoscopy. Andrew calms Miguel down and tries to make peace between Miguel and the doctor, even apologizing for his boyfriend's behavior, all while rationalizing his way out of the procedure. Miguel never speaks about Andrew's treatment by others, or even his lawsuit, for the duration of the film. This scene is noteworthy because it is the only time that any gay character demonstrates any anger throughout the film; this emotion is reserved, rather, for heterosexual characters, and most often seen in their phobic reactions to gay people, as when Miller threatens to punch the gay student he encounters in the convenience store. While Miguel's defensiveness shows his devotion to his lover, it is portrayed as misdirected when Andrew, the AIDS patient, sides with the doctor. More troubling is the fact that Miguel's rage is suggested to be as much a reflection of his ethnic otherness as of the situation he is in. When discussing casting for this character, Demme mentions that he specifically wanted a Hispanic actor in this role, but he does not explain why ("People Like Us"). It is not surprising that he would want this demographic to be represented in a film inspired by his friendship with Juan Botas, a Hispanic man, but why did this character need to Andrew Beckett's non-infected lover rather than the central character himself? I want to suggest that Miguel serves as a complement to Andrew, who, as I explain later, could not be seen to be angry about his ill-treatment. Miguel can afford to be angry because his anger is easily readable as in keeping with the stereotype of Hispanic men as passionate and irrational. His anger is not presented as that of a gay man against a callous health care system, which might highlight the privileged position of the straight, middle-class population to which the film is directed, but, rather, as an ethnic stereotype in a film that is explicitly not concerned with ethnic

discrimination. This makes Miguel's anger much easier to dismiss than his white American lover's would have been. Ultimately, the film's refusal to address difference comes from a position of an unselfconscious commitment to privileged groups that, in fact, perpetuates discrimination .

Assigning all rage to Andrew's passionate but befuddled lover allows the filmmakers to highlight the traits they deem more befitting a heroic person with AIDS. While most of the characters display strong moral convictions, Andrew, like so many chaste white gay males in liberal-minded mainstream texts, is the moral center. Demme describes his most laudable virtue in an interview, arguing,

if your immune system is imperiled, the best way to stay alive is to strive for as much serenity as possible--stress is debilitating and will hasten the onslaught of illness [. . .] We felt this guy is so committed to staying alive, at least long enough to see his name vindicated, he is going to identify rage as a wasted emotion"(DeCurtis).

At the same time, Demme recognizes that many people with AIDS +have no interest in remaining stoic, saying, "I keep picturing ACT-UP demonstrations--and I admire that too. People who are afflicted with this disease are entitled to all the anger they feel like venting"(DeCurtis). In spite of the respect the film's director describes here, the film offers almost no representation of direct action political groups. In one scene in which Andrew and Joe are approaching the courthouse, they must walk between two groups of protestors facing off. The camera zooms in on signs carried by those on the anti-gay side reading "AIDS Cures Homosexuality" and "Got AIDS Yet?," while those on the pro-gay side are literally and

figuratively out of focus, and the only recognizable images are of a red handprint, an signifier recognizable to those familiar with AIDS activism, but likely not to the majority of the film's audience. While ACT-UP is represented with its trademark Silence = Death slogan in the film's outtakes, it does not appear in the theatrical release. Even when a reporter tries to tease out the political ramifications of the trial, Andrew responds to her questions by simply saying, "I am not political." This is perhaps the greatest contradiction in a film that both explicitly locates the homophobia of the general public at the heart of the AIDS crisis and yet insists that AIDS is not a political issue.

Not surprisingly, the gay man dying from AIDS is the character whose representation is the most carefully calculated in the film, and this can be seen nowhere better than in the casting of Tom Hanks. Before starring in this film, and winning the Academy Award for Best Actor in 1994, Hanks was best known for playing likeably boyish characters in light comedies. Reflecting on this role, he said, "I'm probably a good choice for this [. . .] I'm non-threatening. There may be people who loathe me, but not many who fear me. It's that likeability-charming factor I can't shake"(Schmalz). Even though *Philadelphia* is a very different kind of film, the actor insists, "People will still see Tom Hanks, because I'm not that kind of chameleon guy who disappears in a role"(Schmalz). On the one hand, this makes him an excellent choice for a character calibrated specifically to make an audience considered by the filmmakers to be universally homophobic sympathize with a gay man. However, not only does Hanks have clearly recognizable trademarks, he is, as he describes himself in one article, "an unabashed

heterosexual," who had been married for many years and fathered three children (MacInnis).²⁸ If the audience was aware of this, as many probably were given Hank's popularity, it would be far easier for them to sympathize with the actor portraying the character than with the group the character is supposed to represent. Pfiel argues throughout his essay "Getting Up There With Tom: The Politics of American Nice" that a tendency to appear both asexual and apolitical is Hanks's trademark quality, and this is true for *Philadelphia* as well, but I would argue that this is especially important for *Philadelphia* because it allows the film to counteract the other dominant images of gay men in the early 1990s: victims of their own sexual excesses via the AIDS epidemic and angry political activists.

The representational choices reflected in the film do little to dissuade the audience to respond in this way. In fact, were it not for the homophobic hysteria Andrew inspires in Joe, his law partners, and the anti-gay protestors, it would be easy to forget that he is gay. In the scenes that one might expect to make this clear, those he shares with Miguel, it is Banderas whose performance makes the characters' relationship seem credible. In the first scene the two share, Miguel rushes to Andrew in the emergency room, throws his arms around his neck, and kisses him on the cheek; Andrew, whom we see from behind, barely moves. The single moment that Ron Nyswaner points out as proof against the activists' charge that the film shies away from displays of affection between gay men, occurs when Miguel takes hold of Andrew's hand as he lies dying on his hospital bed and kisses each of his fingers individually ("People Like Us"). Unlike Hanks, Banderas does not have a "wholesome" persona to uphold. Certainly, this

²⁸ Of course, it is immensely ironic that Hanks describes himself in the way whilst promoting a film about discrimination against gay men in which representatives of this group are outnumbered, by a large margin, by pregnant women and their manly husbands. Clearly, only heterosexuals can afford to be "unabashed."

is an emotionally powerful scene, but are these displays enough to make committed homophobes reconsider their views? It is clearly not enough for the film's foremost homophobe. During a party that Andrew and Miguel host, in lieu of a memorial service, Joe observes the two men slow dancing together as he is dancing with his wife. As he looks over her shoulder, glowering, Miguel returns his gaze, smiling happily. Later, when Joe and Andrew are alone going over the questions Joe will ask during the trial, Andrew says, "I want to congratulate you on surviving what I assume to be your first gay party." Joe responds with one of many diatribes about what "most people" believe about homosexuality: "you're taught that queers are funny [. . .] that all they want to do is get in your pants. And that pretty much sums up the general thinking out there, if you want to know the truth." Andrew thanks him; then he sings him a song, or, rather, he translates the Maria Callas aria playing during the scene. Andrew tearfully recites to Joe, all the while swaying beside his catheter pole, swathed in bright red light. Much has been written and said in criticism of this scene, and Ron Nyswaner recalls that the filmmaker were told again and again to cut it, but the decision was made to keep it because of the powerful affect it had on the film's director and production crew. Demme acknowledges that this became one of the most polarizing scenes in the film; "people either got it or did not" ("People Like Us"). According to Pfeil, this scene represents Andrew's sexuality more effectively than any of the scenes he shares with Miguel "in the displaced and oblique form of his love of opera in general and a Maria Callas aria in particular." Pfeil goes on to explain that the passion Andrew translates, depicted in the aria as 'the god that come[s] down from the heavens to the earth,' i.e. precisely not an intrinsic quality of Hanks's/Andrew's character but rather an outside force by which he is (and, by implication, was on at least one

occasion)possessed"(128). This occasion, Pfeil implies, is the one in which Andrew contracts AIDS during an anonymous sexual encounter at a gay pornographic film, an incident, like his stereotypical love of opera, which is very much out of character. Thus, the film acknowledges that Andrew's sexuality exists, but does not need to be accepted as a crucial part of his identity.

Rather than dwelling on this explanation of Andrew's sexuality as a kind of infrequent otherworldly possession, the film quickly moves on to the all important revelation, the effect this scene has on its heterosexual onlooker(s). Joe becomes a different character after this scene; he displays no signs of homophobia for the duration of the film, However, his first response is not to say anything to Andrew but rather to go home and hug his wife and daughter. As Charles Nero points out, "the 'good homosexual' [. . .] uses his gifts to help make heterosexual men better family men" ("Diva Traffic and Male Bonding in Film" 59). I would argue that this representation of a straight man who, while virulently homophobic, is essentially decent, as evidenced by his devotion to his nuclear family, is the payoff the straight male audience receives for daring to go and see a film about gay men and AIDS. Ultimately, Joe never indicates by anything that he says that his previous opinion of gay men has changed. Rather, his new attitude towards Andrew is conveyed by a simple gesture. As Andrew struggles to breath in his hospital bed during their last scene, Joe lifts the oxygen mask lying on Andrew's chest and reattaches it to his face (he *touches him*, as Demme enthusiastically exclaims in "People Like Us"). As Pfeil shows to be the case in many of Hanks's films, the history of tensions between privileged and disadvantaged groups is reduced to a single, interpersonal

relationship.²⁹ This conclusion leaves several questions, however. What does this film teach its straight male audience about relating to gay men who are not on the verge of invisibility by death? How does it prepare them for encountering gay men who are different from each other or, more frighteningly, invisible as such? The film does not educate its viewers about the realities of gay men with AIDS whom they might come to know; rather, it helps them *feel*, as Hanks has it, that they already "know someone with AIDS" ("People Like Us").

Of course, the strongest appeal to the audience comes in the form of the trial and its verdict. While I have argued throughout that homophobia is the product of a heterosexist regime of truth, this trial produces an alternative regime of truth authorized by the judicial process. When asked by Joe what he loves most about the law, Andrew replies that "not very often, but once in a while, you get to a part of justice being done." The triumph of justice over homophobia and heterosexual fear of AIDS is certainly the film's strongest statement, but the trials scenes also expose the limits of this justice. The jury's verdict does establish the illegality of discrimination based on illness, but as Joe astutely points out, "we don't live in this courtroom though, do we?" While the verdict represents *Philadelphia's* dramatic climax, the trial scenes contain fragments of a another attempted revision to the heterosexist regime of truth, which is, I would argue, more provocative than the verdict, but lacks the satisfactory conclusion the verdict provides. What sets *Philadelphia* apart from today's representations of homophobia and homosexuality is that, rather than presuming tolerance for diversity in its audience, this film explicitly confronts the audience with its own homophobia. During the trial, after barraging a witness with homophobic slurs, Joe asks the jury and audience to consider

²⁹ Some other examples include class in *You've Got Mail*, and gender in *Big*.

"what we're really talking about here [. . .] our hatred, our loathing, our fear of homosexuals."

Within the context of the film, the tactical purpose of this speech is to make the jury aware of the partiality their presumed homophobia creates so that they can impartially discuss the wrongful termination suit presented to them. More pointedly, Joe tries to bait Charles Wheeler, the senior partner at Andrew's firm, into confessing that gay panic prompted his dismissal of Andrew. He tells Wheeler, "when you realized that Andrew Beckett, your golden boy, your future senior partner was a homosexual and had AIDS, it drove a stake of fear through your heterosexual heart, remembering all the handshakes, the hugs, the intimate moments in the sauna [. . .] you must have thought, 'My God, what does that say about me?'" Given the filmmakers concern over offending heterosexual male viewers, this scene comes surprisingly close to positing gay panic as a result of a *heterosexual* pathology, not a gay one.³⁰ but this exchange is overshadowed by Andrew's growing disorientation and is interrupted when he collapses to the floor. Once again, the spectacle of the gay man dying from AIDS appears to solicit the audience's sympathy, rather than asking it to interrogate its views. Ultimately, the verdict punishes one, very specific kind of homophobia directed against a specific (white, closeted, professional) gay man, without implicating the pervasiveness of homophobia in this discrimination.

³⁰ One can argue that this is quite an about face from the gay panic Joe experiences with the student in the convenience store, and may suggest that he does learn something from that encounter. Or, following Susan Danuta Walters, one might argue that the film contrasts the bad homophobes (of which she cites "the corporate monsters in *Philadelphia*" as an example) with the everyday homophobes, like Joe, who just need "to get to know" a gay person" (*All the Rage* 18, 142).

I still want to end with this, but after I make an argument about how lawfulness, which becomes tied in to the definition of decent, polite behavior in the trial scene, is a professional class regime of truth. However, some audience members refused to be moved by Andrew's operatic recitation and focused on the fact from which that performance distracts: Andrew's sexual relationship with another man. While obviously aware of the audience's homophobia, they do not acknowledge that it is based on knowledge as much as ignorance. A *New York Times* article relates the following story: "At an early screening in a working class neighborhood near Baltimore, followed by a focus-group discussion, one viewer told Mr. Demme that the sight of the two men dancing together made him sick. Mr. Demme, somewhat surprised, asked, "You mean physically sick?" The man said yes, that's exactly what he meant"(Grimes). What makes this exchange interesting is the question of why Demme, who speaks again and again about the universality of homophobia in American culture, would be surprised at all to find these sentiments being expressed with such candor? Perhaps the answer lies in another aspect of identity which the film neglects to examine. The article makes plain that this man from the focus-group is a member of the working class, but almost all of the homophobes in the film are middle-class, and they express their homophobia only in private: Andrew's former partners only among themselves, and Joe only to his wife and friends. I want to suggest that the perception of the focus group member's homophobia as shocking may be a reaction to his refusal to conform to middle-class rules of decorum and politeness.³¹ This

³¹ There is also a scene in the film in which a white bartender tells Joe, who has been defending himself and his decision to represent Andrew to his homophobic friends, "at least we agree on one thing [. . .] those tutti-fruitties make me sick too." Joe is taken aback by this, and this is the last time he presents homophobia in such personal terms. I've thought of arguing that the film advances one of its few arguments about the wrongness of homophobia through the lens of class-consciousness, but I'm afraid this would be out of synch with what I've written so far.

notion of politeness also underscores the filmmakers decision to not "knock the audience back twenty feet" by showing images of gay male intimacy

While unapologetically homophobic, this focus-group member's comments lend important insights into straight homophobia that the film itself lacks. Paul Sendziuk's defense of the scene that the focus-group member found so objectionable echoes the valorization of politeness evident in the film. He writes, "I have always felt this scene of exquisite tenderness was more honest and, because of its poignancy, more confrontational for heterosexual audiences than any number of bouncing bare asses that featured in earlier or later films about gays." What the anonymous homophobic viewer understands, but Demme and Sendziuk fail to recognize, is that dancing, kissing, and "bouncing bare asses" are ultimately different facets of the same sexuality, and that homophobia is not a reaction simply to certain visible expressions of gay sexuality, but to its very existence. Although their political polarity is obvious, the homophobic working-class man that Demme encountered has far more in common with radical queer activists and scholars like Larry Kramer and Michael Bronski than the makers of *Philadelphia* in that he also recognizes that sexuality is a crucial part of what it means to be gay, and no amount of discretion or distraction by well-meaning artists can erase this fact from Middle America's conscience.

Conclusion

While *Philadelphia* may have changed the way some white straight men felt about some people with AIDS, it does not encourage any meaningful change in attitudes towards the populations most affected by AIDS. In treating racial diversity and sexual activity as unworthy

of discussion or representation, the film reiterates the same indifference to the actual lives of gay men that enabled American culture and politics to largely ignore the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and 90s. In many ways, *Philadelphia* is a period piece. Not only has the AIDS crisis, and its victims, changed both internationally and demographically, but so have representations of both gay men and homophobes. It is almost unheard of today for audiences to be presented with a "closeted character who's quite happy about it," as Nyswaner says of Andrew (Grimes). Equally rarely are audiences encouraged to identify with characters who express the virulent homophobia Joe spews for most of the film. Over the past two decades, political correctness has triumphed in the arena of popular culture. However, underneath this veneer of politeness, the same problems persist. Mainstream texts continue to nurture their audiences' ignorance not only of how gay people are different from straights but how they are different from each other.

“What Will the Straight People Think?” Leopold, Loeb, and the Politics of Negative Representation

Just as *Philadelphia* marked the beginning of mainstream cinema's trade in "positive" images of gay men, independent filmmakers were producing works with very different political ends. Many of these were among the queer activists against whom Demme defines his objectives. In a 1992 essay, film critic B. Ruby Rich coined the term "New Queer Cinema" to describe these films, arguing that they are "united by a common style. Call it 'Homo Pomo' [homosexual postmodern]: there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind"(16). Due to the heavy influence of critical theory, these films make demands of their audiences that are absent from more mainstream films; rather than seeking simply to entertain, these films demand that audiences, both gay and straight, make attempts to see themselves differently. David Pendleton clarifies the difference between gay (ghetto) films and queer films by pointing out that gay films "assume we know what a gay man or a lesbian is and then go about to present their lives in a more or less realistic manner" while queer cinema "tends not to take it for granted that we know what a homosexual looks like or does, much less what one should look like or do" (49). While gay cinema defines homosexuality positively, and prescriptively, Pendleton argues that "queer politics and culture [. . .] leave the question open, to suspend any closure of meaning, typically with the hope that new and various meanings can still be found"(49-50). Some of these meanings can be found in what, at first glance, appear to be negative representations. Rich argues that Tom Kalin's film *Swoon* "takes on the whole enterprise of 'positive images,' definitively rejecting any such project and turning the thing on its head"(21). *Swoon* retells the story of Jewish teenagers Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold's

kidnapping and murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks in 1924 and the following trial; this case has previously been fictionalized in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope* (1948) and Richard Fleischer's *Compulsion* (1958). *Swoon* works partially as a response to these earlier works, but also as a counterpoint to representations of queers in mainstream films. I argue that *Swoon* stands in contrast to both in that it neither condemns its queer characters nor asks its audience to sympathize with them, but instead examines the discourses by which the pair has been othered to critique a social order that takes heteronormativity for granted.

Kalin's contribution to representational politics clearly reflects the queer activism in which he participated in the early 1990s. He was a member of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a direct action group that sought to increase the visibility of people with AIDS and their gay and lesbian allies through such tactics as demonstrations, such as kiss-ins and die-ins, and protests, most notably the one that took place in Saint Patrick's Cathedral on December 10, 1989 to protest the political actions of John Cardinal O'Connor, including his opposition to sex education in general and AIDS education specifically ("Stop the Church") an action that received many negative reviews from both the gay and straight press.³² Unlike the hero of *Philadelphia*, the gays and lesbians who participated in ACT-Up's demonstrations were not afraid to be seen as angry or to make straight people angry in turn. From ACT-Up sprang several specific subgroups, including DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television)

³² A statement from the Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Rights included the following: "While it deeply pains us at a time of crisis to publicly differ with a group dedicated to the same cause, we reject this *tactic* as divisive and distracting from our common goal: to end O'Connor's influence in civic affairs" (*We Are Everywhere*, 628). The Gay Men's Health Crisis issued a similar statement: "The only winner is the Cardinal, who no doubt is enjoying this divisive discussion within the AIDS community while his destructive role in the battles to prevent AIDS and empower women is buried"(629). The "Stop the Church" pamphlet put out by ACT-UP and WHAM (Womens' Health Action and Mobilization) includes a Media Report listing the coverage in mainstream newspapers (626-627).

which created videos that documented ACT UP's activities and created alternatives to mainstream coverage of AIDS, which was often misleading and incomplete (Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema" 25-26). Tom Kalin was a member of both ACT-UP and DIVA TV, and acted as one of the founders of Gran Fury, an activist arts group in New York, producing his AIDS video *they are lost to vision altogether* in 1988 (Pearl 26). Kalin was best known for this video and his activism until *Swoon*, his first feature film, was released in 1992.

Swoon, like ACT-UP, drew criticism from some gay viewers for what was perceived as its negative portrayal of a gay couple; some have accused Kalin of inconsistency because of his participation in protests against *Basic Instinct*, a film with a murderous lesbian, the previous year.³³ Kalin said in an interview with Kate Muir, "Basic Instinct was, overall, a stupid movie" ("On location in queer street"). I would argue that one of many differences between these two films it is easy to see mark of Kalin's activist background in his film's repudiation of the link between homosexuality and criminality that both the prosecution and the defense attempted to draw during the trial. Both films feature queer murderers, but *Swoon* also advances a critique of mainstream homophobia. Films like *Philadelphia* seek to counter homophobic discourses by showing gay men who are respectable, not to mention white, affluent, and apolitical. In his defense of *Swoon*, however, Kalin constantly points to the unspoken presumptions behind the notion of respectability. Discussing his past involvement with ACT-UP, Kalin told Christopher Hunt, "I don't see myself as less political now, but my politics now include wanting to talk about a difficult situation in history instead of being some kind of proactive spokesperson for an

³³ See Rich, 16 and Ellis Hanson, "Introduction." *Outtakes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*. Ed. Ellis Hanson. Durham: Duke UP. 1999. According to Hanson, "Tom Kalin was quite vocal in his protests against *Basic Instinct*, evidently untroubled by the fact that, by his own logic, his film *Swoon* [. . .] would have been a far likelier target for his rage"(11).

alleged gay community and making positive middle-class representations of people with station wagons and collies--that's not my life"(84). For Kalin, the solution is not so-called positive representations but a diversity of representations: "We're in a sorry state if we can't afford to look at 'unwholesome' gay and lesbian people"(Okewole). He compares this to the absence of black women filmmakers and gay black filmmakers in black cinema, concluding, "it's dangerous if we can't speak from within our own communities about issues that are politically problematic"(Okewole). While Kalin's conflation of "unwholesome" representations with the suppression of racial, gender and sexual diversity may seem odd, the key point is that marginalized groups have little to gain from presenting themselves as homogenized "communities." This tactic is doomed to fail because no community can truly be homogenous.

Much of the anxiety over negative representations had to do with concerns about how outsiders to these communities would perceive them. Describing some gays' feelings about *Swoon* in *Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema*, a documentary about queer film, *Vanity Fair* film commentator Alonso Duraldi feigns shock and exclaims, "We can't embrace Leopold and Loeb! What will the straight people think?" His lighthearted comment reflects the serious anxiety implicit in the discourse surrounding films like *Philadelphia* about how straight people would receive representations of gay men. Indeed, appealing to the dominant culture is crucial to the enterprise of positive representations for all minorities. However, I want to suggest that queer culture does not have to--and, indeed, cannot--choose between conforming to straight culture and rejecting or ignoring it. In his provocative study *No Future*, Lee Edelman discusses the conflict between queers and the dominant straight culture in political terms. He argues that all politics, whether of the right or the left, are invested in what he terms

"reproductive futurism," the ideology that links heterosexual reproduction to continuity and the future, that which "impose[es] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). While acknowledging that many non-heterosexuals choose to become parents, and thus invest themselves in reproductive futurism, Edelman explains that politics focuses on figurality rather than essential identities, and argues that, as a figure, the queer stands in opposition to the Symbolic and the social order that it structures (17). Conservatives see queerness as a threat to the social order that must be eliminated, while liberals imagine the social order as limitlessly inclusive (14). The logic behind positive representations of gays and lesbians clearly subscribes to the latter view, urging audiences to believe that assimilation is possible if only straights would give queers a chance. However, using a psychoanalytic lens, Edelman argues that the push towards assimilation into the social order denies the value of queerness as negativity, a negativity that is, in fact, necessary to the Symbolic that serves to structure the social order:

Queerness as name may well reinforce the Symbolic order of naming, but it names what resists, as signifier, absorption into the Imaginary identity of the name. Empty, excessive, and irreducible, it designates the letter, the formal element, the lifeless machinery responsible for animating the 'spirit' of futurity. And as such, as a name for the death drive that always informs the Symbolic order, it also names the jouissance forbidden by, but permeating, the Symbolic order itself. (27)

More than simple enjoyment, its most literal, English translation, *jouissance* is "a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law"(25). Both *jouissance* and queerness resist meaning within the Symbolic order, yet they do not offer an escape from it. Thus, while queerness is bound the social order that marginalizes it, it exposes the limits of that order. The social order privileges heterosexuality in that it is read as productive of the future, while queerness represents a pleasure that affords no end outside itself.

If queerness represents that which is in excess of the symbolic the social order, the Child is its privileged center, the figure that embodies the future that the social order is meant to preserve (11). Edelman writes, "[. . .] we are no more able to conceive of a politics without the fantasy of a future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child. That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share of the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights 'real' citizens are allowed"(11). This figure has explicit importance for the right, particularly as it literalizes this figure in attempts to protect children from knowledge of sexuality, particularly queer sexuality (19). As a figure, the Child stands in opposition to queerness as it functions as the justification for heterosexual sex; as Edelman writes, "sexual practice will continue to allegorize the vicissitudes of meaning so long as the specifically heterosexual alibi of reproductive necessity obscures the drive *beyond* meaning driving the machinery of sexual meaningfulness" (13).

In direct contrast to the Child stands the embodiment of what Edelman means by 'the drive beyond meaning,' the specific queer figure he names the *sinthomosexual*. The *sinthome*,

a term Edelman borrows from Lacan, is "the template of a given subject's access to jouissance, defining the condition of which the subject is always a symptom of sorts itself [. . .] in its refusal of meaning [the sinthome] procures the determining relation of enjoyment by which the subject finds itself driven beyond the logic of fantasy or desire"(35). Edelman links the sinthome to sexuality in the figure of the sinthomosexual, who, "insist[s] on access to jouissance in place of access to sense, on identification with one's sinthome instead of belief in its meaning"(37). In his readings of novels and films, Edelman labels as sinthomosexuals characters that refuse the appeal of futurism, preferring their own, individual access to pleasure, in refusing the figure of the Child.³⁴ In Edelman's analysis, the sinthomosexuals are always either killed or absorbed into the social order before the texts come to a close, and the same may be said for the various narratives of Leopold and Loeb that I will discuss, although each of these literalizes the figures of the Child and/or the sinthomosexual in a different way. I argue that the conflict between positive and negative representations of queer people in film is very similar to the political conflict Edelman lays out. If mainstream film has traditionally presented queers as a danger that must remain marginalized within, if not expelled from, society, more recent, liberal-minded films have attempted to show that gay and lesbian people deserve inclusion because they are just like everyone else.³⁵ *Swoon* offers a radical departure from the other films about this pair that because it advances striking critiques of both homophobia and assimilation by presenting its audience with these historical characters in ways that menace the heteronormative social order and remind us of its limitations.

³⁴ These figures include Scrooge in Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol*, the title character in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, and government assassin Leonard in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

³⁵ See Walters, *All the Rage*, 2000 and Bronski, 1999.

Of all of the high profile queer couples of the twentieth century, Nathan F. Leopold Jr. and Richard Loeb have been most usefully deployed in popular culture to justify Americans, especially parents, fear and loathing of male homosexuality. This relationship seemed to validate the conflation of queer sexuality with the destruction of children, and, thereby, the social order and the future of which children offer hope. The prosecuting attorney in the trial, D.A. Robert Crowe, drew on this argument throughout the trial by referring to the defendants as "perverts" and insisting that they had sexually molested their victim (Churchill, 303). Leopold and Loeb's attorney, Clarence Darrow, successfully countered that his clients were children themselves--Leopold was 19 and Loeb 18 at the time of the trial--and that their abnormality and pathology proved that they should not be held responsible for their actions. Their homosexuality figured as evidence of this abnormality and pathology (Franklin, 140). Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1949), based on British playwright Patrick Hamilton's *Rope's End*, and loosely informed by the Leopold and Loeb trial, presents its two murderers as aliens to the normalcy embodied in the film's heterosexual couples. Richard Fleischer's *Compulsion* (1958) not only follows the arguments presented by Darrow, who occupies a central role in the film, it escapes the issue of the boys' sexuality by making them straight. While it is true that neither film could include direct references to homosexuality because of the regulations imposed by the Hays Production Code, both films go out of their way to uphold heterosexuality's centrality in the social order (Kaiser, 66). I would argue that the two boys' sexuality is important to each of these films even when it is surrounded by silence. In both *Rope* and *Compulsion*, the relationship between the characters based on Leopold and Loeb is juxtaposed against a heterosexual

relationship that is constructed as a productive and wholesome bond based on "natural" sexual difference.

Rope

The dialogue between the queer, as represented by the murderers, and the Child, or the Couple that would beget the Child, is played out in each retelling of the Leopold and Loeb story, albeit in very different ways. *Rope* clearly draws on the themes of the Leopold-Loeb trial in its two murderers' use of the Nietzschean superman in their explanation of their crime as well as what many viewers have read as their implied homosexual relationship.³⁶ However, while the historical case involved the murder of a young boy by two slightly older teenagers, *Rope's* murderers, Brandon (John Dall) and Philip (Farley Granger), and their victim, David, are peers who studied under Rupert (James Stewart) at prep school. While David only appears to the audience once in the film--Brandon and Philip strangle him with a piece of rope in the opening scene--his centrality to the dialogue among his father, fiancé, best friend, and aunt, all guests at a party hosted by Brandon and Philip, establishes him as an impeccable specimen of the heterosexual male. He is a Harvard undergraduate who, we learn, "doesn't have to study. He's too bright." He also exerts a strong, corrective influence on his fiancé, Janet, who confesses, "You wouldn't know me these days. I'm a new woman." Janet's comments contrast sharply with Brandon's description of David, just after the murder, as one who "merely take[s] up space," and later, indirectly in a debate with David's father, an "inferior being whose li[fe is] unimportant anyway." In fact, Rupert, after discovering David's body, seems as shocked that

³⁶ D.A. Miller argues that viewers arrive at this through connotation rather than direct evidence ("*Anal Rope*" 1991).

Brandon considers David an inferior as he is that David is dead: "By what right did you dare decide that that boy in there was inferior and therefore could be killed? Did you think you were God, Brandon?" In spite of the superficial liberalism of Rupert's moralizing speech--"I've learned that we are every one of us a separate human being with a right to live and work and think as individuals, but with an obligation to the society we live in"--he ends up reinscribing the superior/inferior binary Brandon has advocated from the beginning of the film. Rupert tells Brandon, "there must have been something deep inside you from the very beginning that let you do this thing," implying that he is not simply guilty of homicidal arrogance or taking Nietzsche's concept too literally, but, rather, there is something inherently anti-social about him. The evil of Brandon and Philip's crime is not only that they have "strangled the life out of fellow human being," but that their victim is one "who could live and love as [they] never could." The crime of which Brandon and Philip are both guilty, as much as the murder of their fellow student, is their inability to love in a properly social and productive (i.e. heterosexual) way.

D.A. Miller argues in his reading of this speech that Rupert is attempting, with great difficulty, to establish himself on the side of heterosexuality, not just morality and justice. This attempt fails, for Miller, because, "when homosexuality is entrusted to the totalizing, tantalizing play of connotation, the only way to establish the integrity of a truly other subject position is performative; by simply declaring that one occupies such a position and supporting the declaration with a strong arm"(127). Even if it is impossible to prove that Hays Production code era characters are gay, when connotations about same-sex relationships abound, as they do in *Rope*, it is equally impossible to prove that anyone is not. I would argue, however, that the one

male character who does escape these connotations is David, whose status as one who is most certainly not an inferior is largely confirmed by his connection to the film's only young woman.³⁷ Miller argues that Janet is a character of little importance in the film, observing that "Arthur Laurent's script focuses as little and with as little interest on [Janet's] character [. . .] as Hitchcock's camera does on [her] body"(126). However, I want to suggest that he is too quick to ignore her function as it regards the film's largely unseen hero

While we learn that Janet has been passed from Brandon to Kenneth, David's best friend, to David, the fact that she becomes engaged to the last is suggests a continuum from the "unnatural" man, who is not only always performing, but also compelling performances from everyone else, to the man with whom she can "relax" and be her "real real" self. With Brandon, Janet is so much on edge that she can only criticize him for manipulating her and Kenneth towards each other when they are out of the hearing of the others. Interestingly, the rekindling of this relationship that we are led to anticipate when Kenneth leaves with Janet is the only assumption in which Brandon is correct. In the logic of reproductive futurism, deciding who Janet will end up with--and it is taken as self-evident that she will end up with someone--reveals Brandon as "playing God" just as much as his decision that Kenneth will live and David will die. Kenneth is clearly no David, but he is sufficient to give the film an ending that assures the audience a sense of continuity. Janet's role as the woman waiting to be claimed is as essential as Rupert's speech in the film's enforcement of the social value of heterosexuality--the bond between her and David would have, and her bond Kenneth will,

³⁷ The film's two other women, Mrs. Atwater, David's aunt, and Ms. Wilson, Brandon and Philip's housekeeper, both pressure Janet into a properly heterofeminine performance. Mrs. Atwater is preoccupied with Janet's engagement to David, while Ms. Wilson admonishes her "If I were you, I'd go easy on the pate, dear. Calories."

contribute to the social order's future, while the bond between Brandon and Philip can produce only death. The resolution of the romantic plot assures that the social order will go on perpetually once those who take a stand against it have been removed.

Compulsion

While *Rope* works to purify the social order by purging the queers, *Compulsion*, based on Meyer Levin's novel fictionalizing the Leopold-Loeb case, focuses on the argument the defense attorney Clarence Darrow (portrayed in the film by Orson Welles) used to plead for life imprisonment, instead of the death penalty, for the two boys: that they were troubled children not entirely responsible for their crime. By doing so, this film, like *Rope*, speaks to the inclusive values of "society," but, this time, by absorbing the Leopold and Loeb characters into the social fabric. In his closing argument, Wilke(Welles) says, "If you hang these boys, you turn back to the past. I'm pleading for the future, not only for these boys but for all boys, for all the young. " While *Rope* secures the future through the re-establishment of a Couple, Wilke connects the two boys he is defending with the figural Child who will inherit the future he claims the presiding judge has the ability to influence with his decision. This is an accurate reflection of the argument Clarence Darrow used in Leopold and Loeb's defense; according to historian Paul B. Franklin,

Darrow continually referred to them in the diminutive as 'Babe' Leopold and 'Dickie' Loeb or generically as 'boys' and 'children' [. . .] In this game of courtroom psychology, Darrow tried to temper the pretrial perception of Leopold and Loeb as ruthless, Nietzschean masterminds by depicting them as

helpless, naïve minors who did not deserve the death penalty. His relentless infantilization of the teens, however, also resonated with the homophobic psychoanalytic conception of male homosexuality as arrested development"(136).

Compulsion not only illustrates Darrow's infantilization of Leopold and Loeb through Wilke's speech; it also plays on the arrested development thesis through the boys' relationships with women, in this case mothers or mother figures. As is the case with *Rope*, these women are unimportant except in how they influence the audience to respond to the male characters with whom they are most closely associated. Artie (Loeb)'s relationship with his mother serves the double function of queering him and reminding us that even child murderers are *someone's* sons. In one of his only moments of vulnerability, Artie asks if "Mumsy" will be present at the trial; his suggestion that his father will probably be spending that afternoon at his club is an afterthought. Artie's father never actually appears in the in the film, but for most of the scene he shares with his mother he is seated on the arm of her chair with his arm around her; these clues link his "abnormality" to his decided preference for his mother. Judd (Leopold)'s gender performance comes similarly under fire early on in the film. When he returns home late one night from a caper with Artie, his brother asks, "don't you ever go to a baseball game or chase girls or anything?" While homosexuality is never more than vaguely suggested as the problem, it is clear that heterosexuality is the solution.

Compulsion steps around the nature of Leopold and Loeb's bond in such a way as to make the audience glaringly aware of the omission. We see this especially as Wilke follows up

the concern he discloses that the press may play up the fact that the boys seem to have no friends, besides each other, with the question, "no girls?" It is only through relationships with girls that the two boys' images can be rehabilitated. As was the case with Loeb, Artie has no trouble producing evidence: "there's a little black book [. . .] with the numbers of forty or fifty girls I've been out with in the past couple of years" Judd has a relationship with only one girl, with whom he has been out once, but Ruth Evans is second only to Artie in shaping Judd's character. Throughout the film, she encourages the audience's sympathy with Judd. She begins by reaching out a hand to comfort him when he tells her his mother died when he was fourteen, and later testifies for the defense as the only friend Judd can name. Even when he attempts to rape her after Artie tells him to do so as an "experiment," she responds by telling him, "I'm afraid for you," as opposed to afraid of him. Ruth is established as the film's "good girl," not only through Judd, but through her relationship with her blonde, hardworking, not too bright boyfriend, Sid. Sid, the antithesis of Artie and Judd, is the character with whom the audience is most clearly positioned to identify. His first response upon hearing not only that the boys have confessed to killing Bobby Kessler, but that Judd tried to rape his girlfriend is rage; he tells Ruth, "I hope they hang (Judd) till the rope rots." However, through the combination of Ruth and Wilke's arguments that Artie and Judd should be seen as children themselves rather than child-murderers, Sid is able to congratulate Ruth on helping to save their lives as they walk away together at the end of the film. The implication is that if this all-American Couple can see the value in Judd and Artie's lives, the audience should be able to follow their lead. The social order as presented in *Compulsion* is clearly more elastic than that

in *Rope*; it can take in and accommodate outlaws, including gender outlaws, depositing them safely on the margins, while keeping those whose normalcy goes unquestioned at the center.

Swoon

Tom Kalin's retelling of the Leopold and Loeb story, with its anachronistic references to push button phones, television remote controls, and even Alfred Hitchcock's films, is as fictionalized as *Rope* and *Compulsion*, even though the characters retain their historical names.³⁸ However, an examination of *Swoon* quickly reveals very a different kind of representational ideology, one that seeks neither to purge nor absorb Leopold and Loeb into the social order, but, rather, to call the legitimacy of this order into question. While both *Rope* and *Compulsion* contrast their Leopold and Loeb characters as overly cultured, intellectual exotics, even without specifically naming their Jewishness or homosexuality, with fairly banal, wholesome heterosexual couples, Kalin makes the opposite point:

I wanted to normalize them--I wanted to ask the audience to, at least for a minute, think about themselves as being romantically obsessed with someone and imagine what it would be like to have society tell them they could never have a romantic future . . . Part of what I'm trying to do with the film is shift some of the responsibility--not the blame, but the responsibility--onto the culture that makes a gay identity an untenable one. (Hunt)

I would argue that the most drastic departure Kalin makes from the previous films is his assertion that this relationship can be read as normal. However, while "normalize" is the word in Kalin's quote that stands out the most, I want to hone in on this in conjunction with another

³⁸ Early in the film, Richard and Nathan reenact a scene from Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*

word that seems to negate it: "obsessed." In *The Trouble With Normal*, Michael Warner discusses two very different meanings "normal" can have: one is "within a common statistical range"(54), the other is equivalent to "right, proper, and healthy"(57). Warner argues that applying standards of normalcy to sex is particularly troublesome; drawing on both definitions, he explains: "In one sense, nothing could be more normal than sex. Like eating, drinking, and breathing, it's everywhere. In another sense, though, sex can never be normal. It is disruptive and aberrant in its rhythms, in its somatic states, and in its psychic and cultural meaning"(55). Kalin is not "normalizing" Leopold and Loeb in order to bring them into the fold of society; to be "obsessed" is clearly not to be "right, proper, and healthy." Rather, he is challenging his audience to admit that being "romantically obsessed" is a statistically common experience, regardless of one's sexual orientation. Many have argued that *Swoon* is a study in obsession, specifically, Leopold's obsession with Loeb, but I would argue that it is equally a study of mainstream culture's obsession with gender performance and gay male sexuality (Catherine Dunphy, *Toronto Star*). In its presentation of the events surrounding Leopold and Loeb's trial, *Swoon* indicts early, and late, twentieth century American culture for both heterosexism and erotophobia, thereby inverting the assimilationist logic of positive representations.

Gender and Performance

I have argued that both *Rope* and *Compulsion* explicitly link reproductive sexuality to the good of the social order by contrasting a "normal" heterosexual couple with the Leopold and Loeb characters. However, a heterosexist logic also governs representations of the male couple. In both films, one of the partners is dominant--he plans the murder and obtains all of

the pleasure from it--while the other is passive, nervous, and participating in the crime only to please the other. The relationships between the two men are strongly reflective of the notion of feminine hysteria present in many representations of heterosexuals in films of the 1940s and 50s. At the end of *Rope*, Brandon tries to stop Philip from revealing their crime to Rupert by slapping him across the face, and in *Compulsion*, Judd dramatically faints in court in response to Ruth's testimony. Even while depicting these men as deviants, both sexually and otherwise, the filmmakers cannot escape the notion that there must be a normatively masculine and feminine partner in every relationship. It is this failure of imagination that Kalin takes on in his portrayal of this relationship.

While Hitchcock and Fleischer employ normative gendered positions in all of the relationships they present in these films, Kalin draws his inspiration from the more transgressive gender politics of film noir. In focusing on erotic obsession as a key theme, Kalin argues that *Swoon* is participating in the film noir tradition, but with a key difference. He argues: "It's the same dynamic you get in other films, it's just that there the obsessive desire always involved women. Nobody says: 'These pathological heterosexuals are having too much sex and it leads them to murder.' Yet Leopold and Loeb became the basis of the long-lasting myth of the pathological homosexual"(Muir). Kalin describes the traditional relationship between the male protagonist and the femme fatale in film noir as hinging on the question, "Who's in control . . . is the man in control or the woman?" He adds that many in his audience had trouble seeing the pair in this light because they were both men (*Swoon* dvd commentary). This is unsurprising given the tradition of film noir, a genre which seems absolutely dependant on a central female character. According to Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, "the link

between the *femme* and *noir* can be read in many ways as a tautological one; if a film has a *femme fatale*, it is a *film noir*, and in order to qualify as a *noir*, the *femme* is indispensable" (2 italics original). While the centrality of the *femme* has made *film noir* an object of interest for feminist scholars for decades, as these writers point out, they also note that part of what makes the *femme* so intriguing is that she "is always beyond definition"(1). I want to argue that *Swoon* does feature a *femme fatale*, but the character who occupies this position is unrecognizable as such from a heteronormative point of view. Kalin's treatment of Leopold and Loeb works to queer film noir by presenting the masculine Richard Loeb (Daniel Schlachet) as a femme--or, more appropriately, butch--fatale by virtue of his indecipherability.

Loeb's maleness appears to disqualify him for this role according to those theorists, like Mary Ann Doane, who link the femme to "the representation of sexual difference in a variety of discourses"(1). Doane crucially links the femme fatale to the female body by arguing that this figure is "not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism"(2-3). However, in the opening passage of her study, Doane also writes that the femme fatale is "the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. For her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be"(1). Doane's study of the role performance plays in the noir classic *Gilda* bears out this description when she argues that Gilda "performs too well; and even though it may be 'just an act,' she becomes inseparable from that act [. . .] the camera proves that she is all surface"(108). I want to suggest that it is this quality of unceasing performance that makes a femme fatale, not biological gender, and, therefore, it becomes possible to read a male as a femme fatale if we accept the premise that all gender is a performance, not only femininity.

A large part of Loeb's indecipherability arises from the film's treatment of his sexuality. In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Kalin offers an account of his complex relationship with Leopold:

Leopold was very much in love with Loeb, but had great difficulty understanding and accepting that. He was willing to do almost anything to continue the relationship. On the other hand, I don't think Loeb was in love with Leopold, nor do I think he was interested in the sexual component of that relationship. He liked Leopold's adulation [. . .] We do not have a homosexual couple, but two people with very different motivations. Richard would have sex with anyone. He was quite a playboy with many girlfriends. There was a degree of the psychotic in Loeb, but I don't think that aspect of his personality had anything to do with his alleged sexuality. (Stone)

In social contexts, both before and during the trial, Loeb is easily readable as a heterosexual. The first scene of the film presents us with Richard and a group of his friends engaged in a performative reading of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs*, in which Richard reads the part of Severin, the masochist, and a young woman reads the part of his reluctantly abusive mistress, Wanda. When Nathan appears, however, the dynamic changes as Richard orders him to "sit down." It becomes clear early on in the film that Richard is in control of their sex life, if not their relationship as a whole. We learn later in the trial sequence that Leopold and Loeb had drawn up a contract in which, in return for participating in these crimes (of Loeb's choosing), "Leopold was to have the privilege of inserting his penis between Dickie's legs." The

wording here makes Richard appear passive, and his behavior throughout the film confirms his desire to be read in this way. While passivity is more typically associated with women, in this text, it is the guarantor of male heterosexuality. Paul B. Franklin points out that Loeb often played up his interest in girls--and girls' interest in him--in the press in order to distance himself from Leopold (132). Loeb also stressed his disgust with their sexual arrangement, prompting Franklin to remark, skeptically, "having held up his end of the bargain for four years, it appears that Loeb's capacity for revulsion knew no bounds" (139). *Swoon* refuses to answer directly the question of whether Richard really is attracted to Nathan or not. Early scenes convey Nathan's sexual frustration by positioning him, fully clothed, some distance behind Richard, who is partially undressed and smirking tauntingly at Nathan over his shoulder. While Nathan reminds Richard that he is "overdue" with Nathan's "payment" by several weeks, he does not approach Richard physically until the latter says, "I guess you want your payment now" and rolls onto his stomach; although he is passive, he is in complete control of the situation. Richard evinces just enough interest in Nathan to maintain his seductive power over him; in one voice over journal entry, Richard makes comments such as "I spent the day avoiding Nathan and reading detective magazines," while Nathan's journal, which includes descriptions of each crime and the following sexual encounter, recalls the "best time yet. Dick really seemed to enjoy himself." We learn during the trial that part of the ritual following each crime involved Richard "pretend[ing] to be drunk," but the question of why he had to pretend to be drunk when other evidence, including the police interviewer's repeated questions about how much the two boys had to drink on the night of the crime, suggests that the boys had access to alcohol.³⁹ While Richard is not readable

as a modern "homosexual," describing him as heterosexual is equally problematic. His sexuality, like the femme fatale's, is a performance open to many interpretations.

While Richard uses his body, both by withholding and yielding, to seduce Nathan and compel him to comply with Richard's criminal desires, he uses a rhetoric that normalizes himself at Nathan's expense to seduce the police and press into believing that he was merely an accomplice. In a scene following the two boys being caught in a lie that disproves their alibi for the night of the murder, Richard is the first to confess that he took part in the crime, but he does so in a very revealing way. When offered food by the police interrogator, he replies nervously that he is not hungry, but as he describes the planning and execution of the murder, he becomes more and more animated, eating the food offered him with relish. The camera shifts its focus back and forth between the two men, but it is not until after Richard tells the interrogator that "Nathan wanted a little boy" with knowing emphasis that the interviewer, who has been posing his questions in an objective, emotionless way, immediately displays interest in what Richard is saying. While the audience can see Richard's pleasure in the crime re-emerge in this scene, the interrogator appears oblivious to it, and in the following scene he shouts at Nathan, his face contorted with rage. We learn from newspaper headlines featured before the boys' arrest that the police "suspect bootleggers, dope fiends, or perverts" for the crime, and that they have been "interviewing bachelor schoolteachers." It is easy for the interrogator to have complete confidence in Richard's story because it presents Nathan as just

³⁹ The speciousness of this description is highlighted by Craig Chester (Leopold's) comments on the filming of the scene. According to Chester, who is gay, he and Daniel Schlachet, who is straight, actually did get drunk before filming one of their sex scenes in order to be more comfortable with each other (commentary on *Swoon* DVD). The ironic contrast between the actors' performance and the characters' suggests that Richard is less comfortable with being read as having homoerotic desires than with engaging in same-sex contact.

the kind of person the police have been looking for. Richard is able to manipulate the police by labeling Nathan as a sexual deviant while himself performing a version of masculinity with which they are comfortable. In interviews with the press, Richard refashions himself in the role of mama's boy: "I'm sure even now [my mother]doesn't believe it. That hurts. A mother's faith." The success of this rhetoric is revealed in a close up of a young woman reporter's face looking up admiringly at Richard during this speech, and voiceover headline following this scene: "the amazing case of angel-faced Loeb and mastermind Leopold will be heard by Judge William Caverly in Chicago City Court." While the close-up of the reporter serves to represent Loeb's attraction for women, the headline, which Kalin tells us reflects the beliefs of the majority of the press, suggests that Loeb's charms worked on many men as well (*Swoon* DVD commentary). Nonetheless, Richard's power, like that of the femme fatale, has limitations. Doane explains, "the power accorded to the femme fatale is an articulation of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity, and the loss of conscious agency [. . .] But the femme fatale is situated as evil and frequently punished or killed" (2). Richard appears to have power over his representation in the media at the time of the murder trial because he can convince members of the press of his authentic masculinity. However, the film expands beyond the trial and the boys' conviction to Richard's death in prison at the hands of his cellmate, James Day. His charms silenced, the press labels Loeb a homosexual by insisting that he made advances on a heterosexual inmate, who killed him in self-defense, and was found not guilty of murder. As is the case with the femme fatale, Richard's ability to trouble the boundaries of sexuality and gender is only temporary, and his silencing at the end of the film allows the restoration of the boundaries he had transgressed.

While alive, Richard is defined not so much by a sexual preference as by his pursuit of a variety of pleasures, particularly the pleasure of confounding others, that never congeal into any particular identity. This quality reflects his readability as another kind of figure, the *sinthomosexual*. I argue that this figure applies to both Richard and Nathan, but in very different ways. While Richard seems to enjoy the fluidity that his lack of a fixed sexual identity allows him, Nathan constantly seeks to form an identity from his sexuality, and fails. Nathan also uses the trial proceedings to engage in his own style of performance, but with the opposite effect of Richard's. The deliberateness with which he does this is especially evident in his first post-confession interview with District Attorney Robert Crowe (Ron Vawter). Crowe tentatively asks him if he is aware that he and Richard "are believed to have engaged in homosexual relations" and that Nathan is "believed to be the aggressor in these relations." Nathan surprises Crowe by not only replying affirmatively, but also with a sense of pride. Crowe quickly changes the subject to the murder itself; when he asks if it was "much of a job, hiding the body," Nathan responds with a double entendre that conflates the murder with homosexual sex: "Well, at first I didn't think it would fit, but once I got started it wasn't very hard at all. Richard helped me." Nathan's behavior is difficult to understand at first glance; why does he deliberately incense those figures of power to whom he is confessing? I want to suggest that part of the reason is that this is the first time his sexuality has been openly acknowledged, and he is embracing it in the only terms the contemporary discourses allowed. A number of early scenes show Nathan pursuing his intellectual hobbies, including ornithology and studying languages. One in particular includes his recitation of a list of male historical figures in whom he has an interest: Sir Roger Casement, Oscar Wilde, Frederick II of Prussia, and

E.M. Forster among them. In addition to their homosexuality, these men all have in common some degree of historical and geographical distance from Chicago in the 1920s. While Nathan is aware of homosexual individuals, he lacks a context in which to be recognized, non-punitively, as a homosexual. The only homosexual identity to which he does have access is that of the criminalized sexual deviant. However, Crowe takes this conflation at face value, as becomes evident later in the trial. This scene--and, indeed, the film as a whole--does draw a link between queerness and anti-social behavior, but this link is far more complex than the reductive logic Crowe, as well as the press, employs for the duration of the film.

Even while arguing that Nathan could not have had a modern gay identity, Kalin presents him as someone who craves recognition and respect for his desires, perhaps as a means of encouraging recognition and empathy from his gay audience. However, in the historical context of the 1920s, Nathan could not be gay, in the 1990's sense, but only queer because his sexual identity cannot be redeemed for social purposes, but is Kalin presenting this impossibility as a tragedy? A scene that takes place just after the murder reveals the two men standing close together near a fire that is burning the remains of their victim's clothing. In a voice excerpt from his journal, Nathan says, "killing Bobby Franks would join Richard and I for life. I wanted to murder the idea of suffering as my condition. I wanted to surpass the bounds of intelligence for something more pure" Although he takes no pleasure in the murder itself, Nathan is a willing participant because he believes this is the only way he can make his connection to his lover permanent. While killing a child may be the ultimate sin in the ideology of reproductive futurism, it is a price Nathan is willing to pay. In his discussion of *jouissance*, Edelman points to two differing, but linked, versions. In the first, *jouissance* "may have the

effect, in so far as it gets attached to a particular object or end, of congealing identity around the fantasy of satisfaction of fulfillment by means of that object," while in the second, jouissance "dissolves such fetishistic investments, undoing the consistency of a social reality"(25). Nathan seeks not only an identity but permanent access to pleasure, which he believes can only be realized through Richard. I want to suggest that rather than lamenting the failure of Nathan's relationship and his quest for a sexual identity, Kalin is making an argument about the anti-social aspect of love. Pleasure, even when it is not coupled with an identity, even when it is destructive, is a powerfully motivating force. Even though, as we see, Nathan gets very little satisfaction from Richard, he is willing to risk his life and sense of self to be with him.

Sexuality and Murder

The film's clear sympathy with Nathan and its brutally detailed representation of Bobby Franks' murder have been difficult for reviewers to reconcile. According to Monica B. Pearl, "*Swoon*' [. . .] tries to make a narrative out of, and make beautiful, what is thought of as senseless: the historical motiveless murder of a small boy. It tries to make sense of, and aestheticize, senseless death"(31). Rather than explaining what sense the film makes of this historic tragedy, Pearl changes her position a few paragraphs later: "while they do not protest their innocence, the two men are throughout unashamed and unapologetic for what they have done. What might seem senseless to the viewers seems to make sense to them"(32). While Pearl is hesitant to make any conclusive claims about the film's objective, Armond White approaches the film with the expectation that it will take a position within a rigid binary of

condemnation/affirmation, and accuses Kalin of aligning himself with the wrong side. He argues, "the film occasionally turns into a thoughtless defense of Leopold-Loeb as if they were ACT-UP's equivalent of the Scottsboro boys or Sacco and Vanzetti--making Kalin's politics seem imprecise, to say the least"("Outing the Past") White's primary objection to *Swoon* is that it focuses on their sexuality, he believes, in an attempt to redeem them, but their crime makes any such redemption impossible. He asks, "Can a valorization of sexual politics be based on the behavior of those who cancel out their humanity? After all, the issue here should be murder, not fucking." Most importantly, he accuses Kalin of "falsifying L&L's social meaning." Both of these reviews are determined to draw a moral from the film; Pearl does not shut down any possibilities of what that might be, but she is certain that Leopold's actions must make some sense to someone. White, on the other hand, suggests that *Swoon* fails to make a case for reexamining Leopold and Loeb's sexuality because it does not recognize that their actions can have but one "social meaning." I would argue that, as sinthomosexuals, Kalin's characters are not interested in making sense of their actions for others, or even for themselves; the pleasure they experience through their actions is an end in itself. Instead, *Swoon* refuses to attempt to make sense of Leopold and Loeb, and, instead, revels in the messiness of its take on this relationship, striving to unmake the sense that the earlier films attempted to make of it.

Perhaps the most important way in which *Swoon* sets itself apart from its predecessors lies in its candor about both the central characters' sexuality and their murder. The first sex scene takes place during the first ten minutes of the film, following one of Richard and Nathan's petty crimes. It is filmed, almost clinically, in an overhead shot, reflecting a greater interest in presenting the encounter accurately, according to the alienists' report presented during the

trial, than in eroticizing it or in shocking or titillating the audience. I would argue that this scene comments not only on the early films' inability to show the sexual component of Leopold and Loeb's relationship, but also on other 1990s films' fear of showing gay sex. While Jonathan Demme feared that a gay kiss in *Philadelphia* would "knock [his] audience back twenty feet," Kalin includes a sex scene early on to show his audience that there is nothing extraordinary about it, to demystify the sex so that he can move on the questions that interest him: how Leopold and Loeb felt about their relationship and how this shaped their actions. I would argue that a similar project of demystification lies behind Kalin's choice to show the murder of Bobby Franks in graphic detail. This contrasts sharply with *Compulsion*, in which we learn the details of the crime entirely from police reports and characters' observations about what has happened off camera; we never see so much as a picture of Bobby Kessler. Perhaps Fleischer believed that visualizing the details of the crime would nullify his painstaking attempt to make the audience sympathetic to the characters, especially Judd. To show the murdered child would make it impossible for the audience to see the murderers as children. *Swoon*, on the other hand, devotes almost ten minutes to showing the murder, from Loeb luring Bobby Franks into the car to the two men hiding his body in the culvert, with no dialogue and very little sound apart from the somber music playing. Kalin explains this choice in the bonus commentary accompanying the dvd: "I had to face the horrifying thing that Leopold and Loeb had done. I couldn't make a movie that made them these kind of glamorous, compelling characters and not put you in that backseat and let you really experience how dreadful what they did was." Ultimately, however, this film is not about sex or murder, as important as both of these are to the narrative; it is, as critic Ruby Rich argues, "the history of discourses that's under Kalin's

microscope"(21). While Rich focuses on the film's treatment of 1920s discourses, I would argue that the film also seeks to turn its audiences' attention to the way homosexuality continued to be linked to violence and death even in the 1990s.

This conflation is especially evident in the trial, with which most of the second half of the film is occupied. Neither Leopold nor Loeb took the stand during the trial, so the courtroom scenes in both Kalin and Fleischer's films focus their attention on the two attorney's arguments. However, while *Compulsion* focuses on Wilke's (Clarence Darrow's) eloquence in saving the "boys" from the gallows, Kalin devotes more attention to District Attorney Crowe and his conflict with the defense's alienist witnesses. Crowe regards the alienists' testimonies as an attempt to distract the judge from the facts of the case. In response to testimony describing Leopold and Loeb's fantasies, Crowe says, "I wish to remind the court that the basic motive in this case is the desire to satisfy unnatural lusts." Citing the coroner's report, Crowe claims that, "when little Robert Franks was examined, his rectum was distended by this much," holding up his thumb and forefinger to indicate a space of about three inches. Even after the judge refutes any implication of sexual abuse in the coroner's report, Crowe returns to this evidence later, adding the further evidence that "the boy's pants were removed [. . .] and these two are perverts." Kalin explains his lack of interest in Darrow as a subject in an interview with Christopher Hunt: "my bone to pick with him is that he defended Leopold and Loeb by saying that the homosexual relationship between them constituted in and of itself a kind of pathology. I cast a character actor who's quite buffoonish and I gave him five lines." This does not explain why he is so interested in Crowe as the prosecutor. The trial presents two competing homophobic discourse: Darrow's, which links homosexuality to arrested development, and

Crowe's, which links it to innate, irreversible evil. Darrow argued that Leopold and Loeb should be allowed to live because they could be reformed, and make valuable contributions to society. However, for Crowe, the pair's threat can only be neutralized by their execution because their transgressive sexuality constitutes an essential opposition to normalcy, decency, and the social order. In his closing argument, he makes this appeal : " in the name of the fatherhood, and the womanhood, and for the children, we are asking for death by hanging for these two cold-blooded murderers. Do not let them go free, or allow their spawn to be thrown to society."

Crowe's description of the two men as murderers here stands in contrast to the rest of the trial, in which he describes them as inverters or perverts, as though the two are on trial as much for having sex as for committing a murder. Even though it is the first discourse that prevails in the trial, it is the second that provides the film's most cogent statement on homophobia in the 1990s. The judge's sentence is followed by a sequence of shots in which Nathan and Richard's profile', as well as the profiles of a number of Kalin's acquaintances, are made the subjects of a phrenological study which reads their physical features for evidence of their moral characters. Kalin's inclusion of this anachronistic science serves to render the verdict, and the discourse that prompted it, ridiculous to a modern audience, but while phrenology had long been consigned to the past by 1992 when the film was released, fear of gay male sexuality had reached a new height as heterosexuals responded to the crisis of the AIDS epidemic.

Although *Swoon* and *Philadelphia* were released only one year apart, and both deal with court cases that produce era-defining discourses about homosexuality, in many ways, the films could not be more different. Demme's film seeks to make the plight of a gay man with AIDS palatable to a straight male audience by providing that audience a straight hero with which to

identify; in this, it has much in common with *Compulsion*; in fact, it appears the only significant change in the ideology of tolerance and absorption that both films promote that takes place in the thirty-four intervening years is that, by 1993, it was possible to represent an openly gay man positively. *Swoon*, however, has no interest in promoting tolerance; Kalin chooses, instead, to call attention to a discourse of heterosexual fear of homosexuality that links the trial of 1924 with Hitchcock's filmic reinterpretation of 1948 and, finally, the political discourse of 1992. Ultimately, what makes *Swoon* so different from both earlier treatments of Leopold and Loeb and contemporary representations of gay men is its treatment of the relationship between sexuality and identity. While in the other films sexuality, whether condemned or celebrated is both static and as simple as a declaration of identity or a relationship. Queerness, however, functions in a very different way. Edelman argues, "As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and to survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organizations as such--on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investments in such organizations. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one"(17). If gay identity is such a social organization, perhaps Kalin is suggesting that sexual pleasure cannot be contained in, or reduced to, an identity. Positive representations tend to focus on gay identity, a category which absorbs and renders invisible the messiness of desire. Perhaps what is negative about Kalin's representation is that brings that desire into focus to show how it not only exceeded the identity of the pervert in the 1920s judicial discourse, but also the category "gay" in the 1990s.

Introduction

In their introduction to a collection of essays based on the proceedings of 2003's Gay Shame conference at the University of Michigan, Valerie Traub and David Halperin describe the political movement behind the new queer cinema, writing, "queer culture in the early 1990s was all about the rejection of heteronormativity, the refusal to conform to social norms deemed irreparably heterosexual and heterosexist; it gravitated towards those figures whose mode of homosexual existence was premised on the impossibility of social acceptance and integration, and therefore on the impossibility of gay pride"(9). This description certainly resonates in Tom Kalin's treatment of the Leopold and Loeb trial; while Nathan's commitment to pursuing the relationship he wants strongly indicates pride in himself, his actions are hardly acceptable by any community standards. In this chapter, I turn from the new queer cinema's vindication of queer individuality and relationships to two mainstream portrayals of gay communities from the late 1960s and early 1990s, both of which reveal a great deal about the changes in both gay pride and gay shame over these decades. Writing in 2009, Traub and Halperin explain the timeliness of looking at the past at a time when the advances made by the gay and lesbian movement had made gay pride a possibility for many:

gay shame confers potential legitimacy and acceptability on the discussion of issues that don't make gay people feel proud, that even proud gay people aren't always proud of. In this sense, gay shame is continuous with gay pride, insofar as the successes of gay pride now make it possible to address realities that may not

present a 'positive image' of gay people. Because of gay pride, we have become proud enough that we don't need to stand on our pride.(10)

While the essays in this collection, as well as the recent proliferation of independent studies on queer shame, show that this topic has been warmly accepted by critical theorists, it has yet to be taken up by popular culture, or, rather, to be taken up in the wake of the gay rights movement. In order to examine productive interrogations of gay shame in mainstream texts, we must look to the more distant past.⁴⁰

In this chapter, I examine two gay playwrights whose work has been very successful with mainstream audiences. Although published twenty-four years apart, Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* have a great deal in common besides their success: both center on communities in which heterosexual characters are marginal and both deal with the topics of effeminophobia, racism, and debates about sexuality among gay men. The events of the intervening twenty-four years--particularly the origins of an international gay and lesbian civil rights movement and the AIDS crisis--also insure that the plays are different in many ways corresponding to their respective historical milieus. I argue that the differences in these plays reflect not only changes in the lives of gay men, but changes in mainstream audiences as well. Both plays, *Angels in American* on Broadway and *Boys in the Band* in off-Broadway productions, drew audiences comprised largely of people who were middle-class, white, and straight. This chapter addresses what I see as the most crucial difference between these two plays: the approaches they take to presenting the lives of gay men, particularly effeminate men and men of color, for this audience. While the older play

⁴⁰ *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, Kathryn Bond Stockton, 2006. *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, Sally R. Munt, 2007. and *Blush: Faces of Shame*, Elspeth Probyn, 2005.

seeks not only to educate its audience about the struggles gay men face, but to implicate them in these very struggles, *Angles in America* rewards its audience by keeping straight and white privilege and homophobia untouched subjects.

This difference may be seen most clearly in *Boys in the Band's* focus on the topic of gay shame, while *Angels in America* focuses on gay shaming. An excellent example of the latter appears in Halperin's address to the conference's audience, in which he read a publicity description for the First Annual Gay Shame Awards in San Francisco in 2002. This event sought nominations for gay people guilty of greed and hypocrisy whose victims were also gay: "gay landlords evicting people with AIDS. Gay cops beating up homeless queers. Gay Castro residents fighting a queer youth shelter"(qtd in Halperin, 41). This event constitutes a reversal of the shame directed against PWAs and other multiply marginalized gay people by those who enjoy more privilege. In *Angels in America*, a diverse group of out gay men verbally--and, in one case, physically--attack gay men who are privileged by their closetedness. Of course, the two contexts are very different. The outness of Kushner's "good" gay characters gives them a currency that is not all that different from the currency of wealth and position the gay shame nominees share; it is the basis of their respectability. Studies of gay shame offer a useful counterpoint to the tendency of gays and lesbians who believe they have achieved respectability to project shame onto those who fail to follow the rules, as I discuss in chapter 1. Traub and Halperin point out that many have shied away from explorations of gay shame because of the fear that it may reverse the progression of this respectability:

Some fear that unencumbered inquiry into the inner life of homosexuality will disclose elements they don't like. Others worry, with good reason, that the

results of free and uncensored analysis will be used against lesbians and gay men. This has led to an unofficial and informal ban on the investigation of certain unsettling or undignified aspects of homosexuality, specifically questions of emotions or affect, disreputable sexual histories or practices, dissident gender identities, outdated or embarrassing figures and movements from the lesbian-gay-queer past. (11).

Crowley's characters exemplify all of these aspects, and more, and it is for this reason that so many critics have been resistant, if not hostile, to the play. However, these characters also show a very different kind of queer ethics compared with Kushner's.

One of the primary objections critics have to Crowley's play is the way in which the central characters treat each other. Indeed, the play's second act involves a nearly constant barrage of insults directed by Michael, the party's host, at almost everyone else. What most of these critics fail to recognize, however, is that Michael is also the character who is most directly punished at the play's end, while most of the gay characters' relationships are affirmed: Hank and Larry's relationship, Emory and Bernard's friendship, even the bond between Michael and Harold, the nature of which remains ambivalent throughout the play. *The Boys in the Band* is not only about shame; it is about a gay community. According to theorist Michael Warner, these two concepts are intimately related:

Shame is bedrock. Queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another, but because abjection is understood to be the shared condition, they also know how to communicate through such a comradeship a moving and unexpected form of generosity. No one is beneath its reach, not because it

prides itself on generosity, but because it prides itself on nothing. The rule is:
Get over yourself. Put a wig on before you judge. And the corollary is that you
stand to learn most from the people you think are beneath you. (35)

While Michael's insults clearly delineate a hierarchy--with Hank, the most masculine of the gay men present at the top and Emory at the bottom--it is Emory who emerges as the most stable and compassionate of the characters. Indeed, most of the play's moral lessons center around Emory. Michael's hostility is set off not by anything Emory does, however, but by the appearance of a complete outsider to the community. Crowley's characters' shame is a reflection of the homophobia directed against them by straight men, particularly in the cases of Bernard, a black library worker, and Emory, an effeminate interior decorator, which they have internalized to various degrees. Both of these characters are punished, in the gay community of the play and the larger heterosexist culture surrounding them, for their failure to live up to the normalized standard of white masculinity. Kushner's characters, on the other hand, are not measured by a heteronormative standard, but, rather, a homonormative one. The objects of shaming in *Angels*, lawyers Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt, fall short of the homonormative standard because of their closetedness and self-loathing, the same charges critics of Crowley's play bring against his characters. It might be argued that Crowley's play is a study of gay shame while Kushner's play, particularly *Perestroika*, the second part, is a manifesto of gay pride, and critics have made precisely these arguments about the plays respectively. However, I argue that these readings are an oversimplification of both plays, because while *The Boys in the Band* reveals a direct implication of heterosexual homophobia in the shame of gay men, *Angels in America's*

condemnation of closeted gay men obscures the effect of heterosexual homophobia in the very need for a closet.

In both plays, straight characters are marginal, but the appeal to straight audiences in very different ways. Most of the characters in Crowley's play have had a significant, identity-shaping encounter with someone who is at least passing as straight. In *Angels in America*, however, heterosexuality is part of the play's diversity. Indeed, this diversity is one of its most significant appeals, although this may be less progressive than it initially seems. According to David Savran, "*Angels in America* assures the (liberal) theatre-going public that a kind of liberal pluralism remains the best hope for change"(31). Liberal pluralism involves a commitment to "celebrating" diversity without necessarily recognizing addressing the imbalance of power that privileges some groups over others. In terms of popular culture, Savran argues, "For the liberal pluralist America is less a melting pot than a smorgasbord. He or she takes pride in the ability to *consume* cultural difference--now understood as a commodity, a source of boundless pleasure, an expression of an exoticized Other. And yet, for him or her, access to and participation in so-called minority cultures is entirely consumerist"(28). What, one may ask, is the audience for *Angels in America* consuming by buying tickets or tuning in to HBO? One answer is reassurance of their open-mindedness and acceptance of minorities. This play is particularly amenable to this kind of consumption because it includes no representations that draw attention to straight privilege.⁴¹

⁴¹ Indeed, it is the sole confirmed heterosexual character--Joe Pitt's wife, Harper--that is presented most completely as a victim. ⁴¹ I do think Hannah's sexuality is ambiguous. Her disgust with men does not make her queer, but it hardly makes her straight either.

Audience

Discussions of both plays vary widely in terms of reading the play's politics; both have been read as works that transformed notions of how gay identity and sexuality could and should be represented on stage, as period pieces with limited political effect, and, occasionally, as both. A striking similarity in responses to the reception of both plays is critics' tendency to perceive them as having two distinct messages for two distinct audiences: a straight one and a gay one. According to John M. Clum, "*The Boys in the Band* allows its heterosexual audience a liberal compound of pity, tolerance, and superiority. Homosexual audiences saw that the characters' 'problem' was not their sexual orientation but their 'internalized homophobia,' their acceptance of the judgments of family, medicine, law, and religion"(206). On the surface, Clum's comments seem to give straight audiences very little credit for empathy or even the capacity for productive thought about gay peoples' lives, while assuming that gay viewers are automatically equipped with a sophisticated understanding of psychology and intersecting networks of oppression. Perhaps this is in part due to invisibility of homosexuality in mainstream culture during the time of the play's original run: 1968-1969. After all, as Vito Russo points out, "*The Boys in the Band* was taken for gospel in an America populated by people who had never met a live homosexual in their entire lives"(175). If one accepts that the closet was so pervasive that most Americans believed they had never met a homosexual, it is easy to believe they had not invested serious thought in the struggles of this minority, let alone their role in perpetuating them. However, Clum repeats this judgment in his discussion of the film (released in 1970), adding that it is "still available" to viewers in 2000: "Heterosexuals may find the video a reassuring, if inaccurate picture of the unhappy lives of 'those people;' gay men

can see it as a quaint period piece or a slice of pre-Stonewall gay life"(203). While the contemporary gay audience Clum imagines has the benefit of enough historical and emotional distance from the pre-Stonewall era to find the self-loathing bickering of Crowley's characters "quaint," his comments suggest that the growth in gay visibility and pride has produced neither knowledge nor understanding for straights, but only anxiety.

Clum is not the only critic to read the play through assumptions about its intended audience. Describing his experience of seeing *Boys* in revival with a predominantly gay audience in 1996, Timothy Scheie explains his anxiety about his own and the audience's reception:

I too enjoyed it, yet was not entirely comfortable with my reaction nor with that of the audience. After all, aren't we supposed to have a problem with *The Boys in the Band*? I wondered at the audience's--and my own--willingness not only to tolerate but to derive pleasure from watching the taxonomy of pathetic and self-loathing characters that inhabit this play. After decades of discomfort or even disavowal, what had changed to make this play acceptable, meaningful, or at the very least entertaining for a gay spectator in 1996?(2)

Obviously, it is the audience, not the play, that has changed, and some of the reasons Scheie proposes should not necessarily be confined to a gay audience. One of these is the growth of mainstream gay visibility during the 1990s: "the current range of gay personae on stage, film, and most recently television relieves the *Boys in the Band* of the heavy responsibility of being the first and only frank depiction of gay men mainstream audiences could see"(7). Most of these newer texts are not promoted for exclusively or even predominantly gay audiences; they contribute to the entertainment, if not the education, of straight audiences as well. Some

critics have even begrudgingly considered that *Boys* helped bring the possibility of more positive representations to life. According to Russo, "in spite of itself, Crowley's passion play was part catharsis and part catalyst. His characters were losers or borderline survivors at best, but they paved the way for winners"(175). By 1996, *Boys'* frank depiction of a group of gay men at their worst could be read not only as politically incorrect, but also refreshingly different from those texts designed explicitly to foster positive (assimilationist) views of gays. I would argue that Crowley's play has a greater capacity to educate a straight audience about the complexity of gay life because of the very political incorrectness that serves as an embarrassment for so many gay viewers and critics.

Indeed, it seems likely that without the pressure of being the first representation of this kind, the play should be read more positively than it was in 1968. For some gay people, including playwright Edward Albee, the greatest problem with the play was the perception that it would impact straights' views of gay people negatively. In his interview for the documentary *Making the Boys*, Albee said the play's audiences were "delighted to see people whom they didn't have to respect." Albee's comments might seem presumptive, were it not for the fact that not only did these audiences not have any "out" gay texts with which to compare *Boys* (Albee and Tennessee Williams, the two major gay playwrights of the 1950s and 60s, having kept their gay characters either off screen or visible only to the most careful and well informed viewers), but critics had no precedent by which to gauge a straight audience's response to representations of out gay men. For Clum, the reward is not worth the risk; speaking of the increasingly mainstream audience the play drew in its initial run, he writes, "It is one thing to show a gay audience the dark side of its life; it is quite another to profit by parading this before

a mainstream audience"(203).⁴² In spite of --or, perhaps, because of--his cynical view of straight audiences' inability to feel for and think about gay characters, Clum suggests that gay authors must offer only the most positive representations for straight consumption. This audience's reception may be inevitably heterosexist and homophobic, but it is the gay artist's responsibility not to give them any excuses.

It may well be that many straight viewers throughout these decades have responded in the arrogantly pitying ways Clum describes, but I argue that they have done so in spite of the author's intention and not, as is the case with more recent representations of gay men such as *Philadelphia* and *Glee*, because of it. Crowley's portrayal of apparently straight characters, both the ambivalent Allen who attends the party and the figures from Emory and Bernard's pasts, is far more critical than Clum would have us believe. Tony Kushner, whose introduction to the 2008 edition of *Boys* expresses great appreciation for his predecessor, offers one of the few discussions of the play's audience that does not reduce it to a specific sexual orientation. For him, the play's reception was strongly impacted, even overwhelmed, by the events surrounding it: "The world for gay people was markedly different in 1970 than it had been in 1968; it became different midway through the play's run. *The Boys in the Band* was still drawing large, though largely straight, audiences to its Off-Broadway home on the night of June 27, 1969," the night riots began at the Stonewall bar(vi). Soon after its initial opening, *The Boys in the Band* "looked, especially for those who engaged actively in the struggle for our freedom, like a scabby relic of an unmourned, unliberated, unenlightened time [. . .] when not denounced as destructive, [it]was condescendingly described, and still often is, as belonging to that

⁴² Clum is citing Kier Curtain's *We can always call them Bulgarians*, which discusses the audiences of *Boys in the Band*).

depressing aesthetic subcategory: the period piece"(vi). Certainly, *Boys* is very much of its time in terms of both language and content, but so is Kushner's epic drama in which both of the characters with AIDS are middle-class or affluent gay white men, a common theme in the 1990s, but one that hardly ever appears in contemporary popular culture.⁴³ Even while regarding *Boys* as a period piece, Kushner credits the play with more complexity and a stronger impact than others have done: "So unbearable is their condition of being slowly crushed and torn asunder, compressed and pulled apart, that the audiences of 1968, laughing and squirming, were made to understand, to *get it*: something's absolutely got to change"(viii). If *Boys in the Band* is an indictment of gay self-loathing and pervasive social homophobia, and I would agree with Kushner in arguing that it is, his appreciation of this play makes sense considering that he tackles these same themes in *Angels in America*. However, there is far more laughing than squirming for straight audiences in Kushner's play, particularly *Perestroika*, the play's second half. However, comparisons of the two plays usually end up benefiting Kushner's. In his essay on *The Boys in the Band's* revival, Timothy Scheie writes in response to David Savran's contention that *Angels* fails to escape the hegemony it critiques, "If even the sympathetic and empowered characters of Kushner's play are suspect, the troubled men in *The Boys in the Band* conform so completely to homophobic expectations that their appearance would seem to constitute not a liberating breakthrough for gay men but a naturalized justification of gay self-loathing"(8). What Scheie overlooks is that *Angels in America* also features self-loathing gay characters; the difference is that it also includes characters that the audience is clearly expected to respect.

⁴³ A primary risk group for AIDS currently is black heterosexual women, as we see in the films *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009) and *For Colored Girls* (Tyler Perry, 2011).

By the early 1990s, white gay men had achieved enough visibility in mainstream culture that some representations could be recognized as positive, not simply risqué or controversial. Since Clum stresses the need for "a positive gay self"(207), it is no surprise that *Angels in America* wins his enthusiastic approval: "Kushner's extravaganza challenges the heterosexuals in its audience to see with gay eyes, while challenging gay men to be the revolutionaries our social position enables us to be. *Angels in America* is uncompromising and proud in its gaze"(249). Unfortunately, Clum does not explain how the straight audience can see with "gay eyes," or why it could not see *The Boys in the Band* in this way. Activist and playwright Larry Kramer offers equally high praise for *Angels* from an entirely different perspective, one of disgust with the overly sentimental and inaccurate representation of gay men with AIDS in *Philadelphia*. He offers Kushner's play as an alternative to Demme's film precisely because it does not sugar-coat the realities of AIDS for mainstream audiences:

Anyone who wants to see what AIDS is really like, and what gay life is really like, and how audiences are reacting to it, should see the seven hours of theatre known as "Angels in America,"(sic) which is on Broadway, is selling out every performance, and doesn't give a damn what Middle America thinks, which is why each of the three performances I've attended I was surrounded by people-- straight people!--from Middle America ("Lying About the Gay 90s")

Of course, Kramer's observations only prove that straight people from Middle America saw the play and, presumably, liked it; it does not tell us that the play made them think about AIDS or gay people differently. While *Angels* is strikingly different from *Philadelphia* in its refusal to apologize for gay difference, both texts are driven by the need to draw an audience; their

creators and producers merely have different audiences in mind. While *Philadelphia* needed to appeal to megaplex audiences in Middle America, *Angels in America*, before its release as an HBO miniseries in 2003, only had to appeal to a theatre audience that, while largely white and straight, was also mostly urban and liberal.

As with *The Boys in the Band*, audience plays a crucial role in both positive and negative criticism of Kushner's play. In his review of *Angels in America*, including the play and the then newly aired HBO miniseries, David Mendelsohn wrote,

Within *Angels* lurks that great work about America itself, one that could well speak to the heartland, a work about migrations and revelations and about the essential tragedy of American and possibly even human experience, in which one person's liberation--now more than ever--often means another's suffering. But the play as we have it is a far more limited affair, one meant to reassure not the heartland but the marginal groups whom the play cosily addresses. (47)

These groups include gay men, women, and racial minorities; Mendelsohn points out that the characters that represent these groups are presented most sympathetically, while contempt is reserved for those characters whose prejudices are directed against those groups to which they belong, gays in Joe Pitt's case and gays and Jews in Roy Cohn's. David Savran picks up on the same theme when he points out, "Amid all the political disputation there is no talk of social class. Oppression is understood in relation not to economics but the differences of race, gender, and sexual orientation"(31). This is one point of similarity between *Angels* and *Boys in the Band*; Clum, after laying out the demographics of the party attendees, states, "Clearly, the only things that connect the members of this bickering group are their gayness, their self-

hatred, and their middle-class credentials. The only thing they share with their presumed audience is their position in the middle class"(205). This in part reflects Crowley and Kushner's awareness of the plays' theatre audiences, which, while diverse in many respects, required both the leisure time and disposable income to see the plays on, or off, Broadway. However, by 2003, the year the HBO miniseries aired, it was unlikely that even a television audience would include many viewers who had never met a gay person. Perhaps this is one reason why concerns about positive representations are much rarer in discussions of *Angels* than of *Boys*. Of course, another is that *Angels* balances its representations of closeted men with triumphant PWA Prior and his best friend, Belize, the African-American nurse who is both the play's voice of reason and its moral compass. Clum characteristically discusses the play's audience in terms of what he perceives to be its sexual identity: "At the end we all are blessed, liberal and conservative, homosexual and homophobic. No threat there. [. . .] like other classics of American social drama--*Death of a Salesman*, *Awake and Sing*--it lets its audience off the hook. Like much of gay drama, it does not question the assumed righteousness of out gay men of liberal to left persuasion"(265). Clum appears to recognize the diversity of the audience only to narrow it considerably. Perhaps, however, his point is that Kushner is encouraging even a gay-friendly straight audience's belief that out gay men are morally irreproachable. Indeed, this identification with gay-friendliness is part of what straight audiences are consuming by viewing this play. Unlike *The Boys in the Band* in 1968 and 1970--as well as *Philadelphia* in 1992--*Angels in America* takes the gay-friendliness of its audience for granted.

Gay saints

This expectation is nowhere more evident than in the position of self-described "beyond nelly" Prior Walter as the play's hero. It would be hard to imagine a figure more different from saintly gay PWA Andrew Becket. Prior is variously angry, theatrical, articulate, funny, passionate, and even "lascivious" (*Perestroika* 1:4). He suffers more profoundly than Andrew, whose symptoms seem to require straight witnesses to be sufficiently moving, and ends the play by delivering the speech in which he proclaims, before blessing the audience: "we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens" ("Epilogue"). This rhetoric, reminiscent of the ACT-UP chant, "We're here. We're queer, We're not going anywhere," seems to justify the play's enthusiastic reception by gay men, including activists like Larry Kramer. On the other hand, the play has drawn criticism from academics for similar reasons. In his book *Homos*, Leo Bersani writes, "The enormous success of this muddled and pretentious play is a sign, if we need still another one, of how ready and anxious America is to see and hear about gays--provided we assure America how familiar, how morally sincere, and, particularly in the case of Kushner's work, how innocuously full of significance we can be"(69). In one way, Bersani seems to view the play's popularity with straight Americans as a failing in itself. This is certainly the issue Kushner takes with these comments in his essay "On Pretentiousness" in which he writes, "I am more concerned, and intrigued, by Professor Bersani's consternation over the fact that I have offered the straight world representations of gay men who are 'morally sincere.' I plead guilty"(73). The words that stand out to me, however, are "familiar" and "innocuously." Certainly, the slice of gay life it offers them is even more insular than in *The Boys in the Band*. Prior speaks to the play's only confirmed heterosexual, Harper, almost exclusively in visions and dreams, and his friendship

with Joe Pitt's mother, Hannah, results in him giving her a makeover.⁴⁴ While Prior is quite different from Andrew Beckett, he has a great deal in common with Kurt Hummel from *Glee*. By the end of the 1990s, a decade that began with AIDS victims and activists accounting for most of gay men's visibility, the primary representations of gays offered to mainstream America came in the form of makeover shows such as "What Not to Wear" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," in which straight women sought help from gay men to help themselves and their male lovers become more desirable. The clients get to fit normative models of masculinity or femininity; the professionals get to show America how "familiar" and "innocuous" they are. The downside of this is that showing how helpful gays can be to the dominant culture does not entail the reciprocation of the dominant culture recognizing and affirming the full complexity of gay people's lives.

While Prior encourages straight people in the easy assumption that consuming texts in which gay men play central roles confirms their liberalism, he offers gay audiences a model for coping with struggles. In the face of his disease, Prior is honest, confident in his rights, and, ultimately, very brave. At the same time, he also experiences less direct homophobia than any other character in the play. Most of the characters in *The Boys in the Band* do not share these noble traits, but neither are they similarly insulated against homophobia. Michael is infused with homophobia; he is even proud of being closeted. Explaining why he does not want his friend Alan to know he's gay, he says, "you have to admit it's much simpler to deal with the world according to its rules and then go right ahead and do what you damn well please"(23). It might be argued that the differences between Prior and Michael represent, in a small way, the

⁴⁴ He ridicules her hairstyle in *Perestroika* (4, 4. 231) and by the Epilogue set five years later, she "is noticeably different. She looks like a New Yorker"(277).

divide between the two plays, as Prior is, arguably, the most "out and proud" gay man in Kushner's play while Michael is the most self-loathing in Crowley's. However, that would be an oversimplification of both the characters and the plays. Michael is not punished simply for his self-loathing, but for his loathing of other gay men, particularly Emory and Harold, whose stereotypical characteristics make them the most recognizably gay of the party guests. In this, he has more in common with Kushner's Roy Cohn than with Prior. Despite the drastic improvement over Michael that Prior clearly represents, I would argue that Crowley's play ultimately offers an interpretation of gay community that is messier and more complex than Kushner's. Crowley uses Michael to advance an argument about the way in which internalized homophobia damages gay communities, while some gay men have taken Prior to be a model. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Kushner cited Stephen Spinella (the actor who played Prior in the play's first run on Broadway) as saying that he wished to be more like Prior, and admitted that this is true for himself as well (Vorlicky 46). In the context of the play, Prior is presented more often as the center of a community of friends than as an ideal to which gay men with AIDS should aspire. In the play's epilogue, he is surrounded by people without whose compassion and support he would probably not be alive. At the same time, all of these characters are subject to Prior's directions and edits in this scene. This is no surprise since, however indebted he may be to them, he plays an even more crucial role for them. Louis, Belize, and Hannah are each defined in relation to Prior. Louis is the lover whose abandonment of Prior sets in motion the latter's visitation by the Angel, and both Belize and Hannah serve as caretakers who help him survive this encounter. Apart from his scenes with Roy, Belize's main role in the play is as Prior's confidant and advocate. Even the scenes in which he and Louis

ruminate on race, forgiveness, and freedom in America are all instigated by Louis's need to find out about and communicate with Prior. Indeed, Louis changes from being unable to make a coherent argument to putting his body at risk for his beliefs when he attacks Joe for his court decisions. Hannah transforms from a bitter Salt Lake City housewife to a hip, optimistic New Yorker solely because of her friendship with Prior. Prior is not only a "great person," as Kushner describes him in an interview with Michael Cunningham, he makes other people good by proximity, including the play's audience (Vorlicky, 73).

None of Crowley's characters possess this kind of benevolence, nor do they offer any direct blessing to the audience. Indeed, I would argue that this play, unlike *Angels in America*, advances a direct critique of heterosexism and homophobia in straight culture as well as gay individuals. Of all the guests at the party Michael hosts, Emory is the most recognizably gay, and thus draws the most explicit expressions of homophobia. While most of the other characters easily pass for straight when Alan appears, Emory finds it impossible to cease his campy use of "she" to describe men. On the other end of the play's spectrum, masculine Alan is as unable to stop insulting Emory. It is in this scene that the clash between the two very different worlds depicted in the play becomes explicit. Alan, whether he is straight or not, is clearly part of the straight world, and this makes him, along with much of the audience, feel like a minority, if only for the duration of the play. Initially, Alan cannot recognize this; he moves from calling Emory a "goddamn little pansy" to claiming, "I couldn't care less what people do--as long as they don't do it in public--or--or try to force their ways on the whole damn world" when Michael refuses to give Alan the agreement he clearly expects. Crowley's portrayal of Alan exposes the discrepancy between voicing homophobic opinions and recognizing oneself as

homophobic, and this is an important part of his position as a representative of the dominant culture. Many critics regard Alan and the audience as practically interchangeable, but if he is the character with whom the audience most identifies, this makes the play more effective in educating its audience about homophobia, not less so.

Emory's flamboyance, and other characters' reactions to it, plays a crucial role in the play's message about acceptance. As Judith Halberstam reminds us, "the sissy boy is the incarnation of shame," as much today as in 1968 ("Shame and White Gay Masculinity" 229). Indeed, the characters who most represent "normal" masculinity, Alan and newly out Hank, find Emory intolerable, Alan so much so that he attacks him with his fists near the end of the first act. No part of Emory's difference--his bawdy humor or his effeminacy--can be assimilated into the dominant culture. Although "pansies" had served as comic relief in Hollywood films since the silent era,⁴⁵ Emory is much more than that. He is the closest in Crowley's play to the kind of moral yardstick that Prior represents in *Angels*. He is equally far from being the kind of gay man that gay men want to be and the kind of gay man straight men wish they knew, but no one is allowed to ridicule Emory without consequences. He is the recipient of more hostility than any other character--with the exception of the hustler, Cowboy --both from the party guests and the straight world; Michael and Bernard both mention that he is frequently arrested on morals charges. However, the incident that has had the most devastating impact on Emory seems comparatively innocuous. When the party guests play a game called "Truth," in which each character must call the one person whom he has truly loved and confess that love to him, Emory calls a straight man on whom he has had a crush since he was in the fifth grade, Delbert

⁴⁵ Vito Russo discusses the comic gay trope in his chapter "Who's a Sissy" in *The Celluloid Closet*.

Botts. As a high school student, Emory had asked Botts to be his friend, only to be humiliated at his junior-senior prom after Botts told his fiancé and she told everyone at the dance. In spite of this, Emory ends his story by saying, "what they didn't know was that I loved him. And that I would go on loving him years after they had all forgotten my funny secret"(89).

Emory, along with Bernard, is one of the characters who most clearly and completely embody the shame which is Crowley's central subject, but critics have not paid sufficient attention to the ways in which their gay shame intersects with gendered and ethnic shame. This intersectionality is significant to recent studies of shame because, as Halberstam observes of this trend, "the subject who emerges as the subject of gay shame is often a white and male self whose shame in part emerges from the experience of being denied access to privilege"(223). This is certainly the case with Michael, and part of Alan's anxiety at the party certainly arises from the possibility that his privilege may be stripped away, even if he is heterosexual. Indeed, the only character who is truly comfortable with shame is Emory. While it is easy to read this quality as evidence of what Kushner describes as Emory's masochism (xi), one might also see it as an example of one of the most written about themes in Kushner's play, forgiveness. Even though Botts clearly facilitated Emory's humiliation, and hangs up on him in the play when Emory refuses to give his name, Emory expresses no anger towards him. He also defends Alan when Michael attempts to force him into taking his turn at the game, a scene that is importantly connected to the one I have just described. Emory's story is punctuated by stage directions describing Alan's actions; he is very nervous: he refuses to respond when Michael slaps his shoulder, drinks heavily, and cannot return Donald's gaze. (86-87). The reason for this becomes evident in the later scene when we find out that he ended a friendship with Justin

Stewart, also a friend of Michael, because Justin asked to be his lover. Even if we believe Alan, who says he never slept with Justin, it is clear that he perceives a comparison between himself and Delbert Botts. When he apologizes to Emory during the later scene, it is not simply, as Vito Russo has it, that he pities him, but that he recognizes his earlier actions not as justified masculine disgust, but as undeserved cruelty (175). In these scenes, Emory's forgiveness serves to shame Alan, and those members of the straight audience who have ridiculed effeminate men.

Black Gays

While Emory represents the stigma of effeminacy that all of the gay characters, with the exception of Hank, face to some extent, Bernard faces an entirely different kind of shame related to his position as the only non-white character in the text.⁴⁶ He is the first to play "Truth," and, like Emory, he calls an apparently straight man. Peter Dahlbeck is the son of the wealthy white people in Detroit for whom Bernard and his mother worked when he was younger (82). There are two significant differences between the two histories, however. First, while the extent of Emory's relationship with Delbert Botts is one dental cleaning and one conversation, Bernard actually had sex with Dahlbeck once. Secondly, while Bernard does not speak to Dahlbeck but, rather, to his mother, he is devastated by the call. While up to this point, Bernard has been one of the only characters having fun at the party, he spends the

⁴⁶ There are, of course, more kinds of shame evident in the play than these two. The litany of shames with which Harold introduces himself--"What I am, Michael, is a thirty-two-year-old, ugly, pock-marked Jew fairy"(53)--would take a great deal of space to properly address. I have decided not to focus on Jewish-ness as a category in this essay, even though it is also a crucial topic in *Angels in America*, because the two plays present this topic in incompatible ways. Harold's Jewish-ness does little besides contribute to the play's diversity; only he and Michael discuss it. In *Angels*, however, several characters are Jewish, and this plays an important role in their sense of history, ideology, and identity. I find that the plays' representations of black gay men and effeminophobia are similar enough to substantiate a balanced discussion while different enough to support the argument I am making about them.

duration drinking and uttering the refrain, "I wish I hadn't called." Since he does not tell Mrs. Dahlbeck he is in love with her son, the source of his shame is clearly not only his sexuality. I would argue that it is the result of his immediate retreat into the subordination and deference he had practiced towards his white employers. We see this first when he announces himself as "Francine's boy," not her son, repeating the racist practice of defining black adults as children. It is also apparent, however, in his concern to avoid not only personal embarrassment, but scandal for the family as well. Recalling the incident, he remembers feeling relief when Dahlbeck chose to pretend nothing had happened, but, in the present, he is not only unable to declare his love, he instead voices his hope that Dahlbeck will be able to "get everything straightened out" with his third wife (84). Bernard's choice of words is apt; he helped Dahlbeck stay "straightened out" before, and now, even while surrounded by white gay friends in New York, he remains conditioned to keep white men's secrets.

This conditioning is paired with what Kushner describes as Bernard's "passive acceptance of racism"(xi). At the party, he endures a near constant barrage of racial slurs from Emory, a habit Michael points out when Bernard urges Emory not to play the game because of the damage to his dignity. Bernard's reason for putting up with this is, again, in service to a white man: "I let [Emory] do it because to him it's the only thing that, to him, makes him my equal. We both got the short end of the stick--but I got a hell of a lot more of it than he did and he knows it. I let him Uncle Tom me just so he can tell himself he's not a complete loser"(89). Bernard's unqualified assertion that being a black gay man gives him an advantage over an effeminate white gay man is suspect at best, and exposes the play's rather uneven representation of discrimination. Every character defines himself in opposition to Emory's

effeminacy, which has the effect of his seeming to have "the short end of the stick," while no one pays any attention to Bernard's race, except for Emory, until Act II. This suggests not so much that Bernard has an easier life as that Crowley is not as interested in how homophobia intersects with racism as he is in the way effeminacy is punished. However, Bernard's acceptance of Emory's racism, like Emory's forgiveness of Alan's homophobic remarks, offers the audience a lesson. After hearing Bernard's explanation, Emory promises Bernard, "I won't ever say those things to you again"(90). According to Kushner, "This is a tiny evolutionary advance in consciousness. Bernard, having exposed the machinery and identified the fuel of Emory and Michael's racism, has taught Emory something, not only about Bernard, but about himself"(xi). In his eagerness to draw a consistent lesson from this scene, Kushner overlooks one important detail. While Bernard excuses Emory's racism, he refuses to do the same for Michael. In some ways, not only the character, but the text itself is tolerant of racism far more than of homophobia against white gay men, not only because of Bernard's privileging of Emory's feelings over his own, but also because Bernard all but vanishes from the play after this conversation. However, it is he who defines the limits of acceptable racism, rather than allowing a white man to do it. While Bernard is more marginal within the play than Emory, like his friend, his experience of shame is a means by which he demonstrates his agency, rather than evidence of a lack thereof.

Agency is far more proactive in Tony Kushner's play. His single African-American character, Belize, seems at first to be the antithesis of Bernard. He unflinchingly confronts the racism expressed by Roy Cohn and Louis, and exposes the racism at the core of Reaganism's idealization of the American past. He tells Louis: "The white cracker who wrote the national

anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word 'freedom' to a note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me"(*Perestroika* 4:4 228). Belize highlights the racial particularity of what is taken to be a universal symbol of America by people, like Louis, who believe race is not important there (*Millennium Approaches* 3:2). While in *Boys*, Bernard is the exception that proves the rule of racially unmarked gayness, some critics argue that the inclusion of Belize makes race of central concern in the scheme of Kushner's play. Framji Minwalla argues that, "by locating a black man as the ethical center, and then playing his other characters off him, Kushner makes identity, especially racial and gendered identity, one of the central facts of his drama"(105). While this reading grants Belize a crucial role in the play, Minwalla acknowledges that it comes at the expense of Belize's particularity; he is a function more than a multi-faceted character:

He appears not to inhabit his opinions but, rather, to speak for and from the collapsed perspective of a black, leftish, ex--ex drag queen whose chief concern is not himself but, rather, the physical and psychological well-being of other people. Belize is a cipher, an enigma, a blankness. His name, even, is not his own--'Belize, as Kushner tells us in his list of character descriptions, is a drag role that stuck. Kushner renders him no personal history, no particular or idiosyncratic psychology. His sexuality, skin color, and ideological bent, however, represent--without those queering distinctions of individual difference--all those communities (gay, black, drag queen) whose identities converge with his. (105)

While Belize does bring all of these identities together, it is worth noting that the only identity he shares with any of the other characters is being gay.⁴⁷ Perhaps this is the reason why, of these three subject positions, he is only permitted to speak about race. The topic of his identity as a black drag queen comes up only once. When Louis interrupts Belize's claim that "we black drag queens have a rather intimate knowledge of the complexity of . . . [lines of discrimination]" to ask if he is doing drag again, Belize refuses to tell him, and his only response to Louis's comment that drag represents internalized oppression is, "Louis, are you deliberately trying to make me hate you?" (*Millennium Approaches* 3:2 100). He also only discusses his sex life very briefly, and also with Louis; we learn that he has a sexual past with Prior and that he currently has a lover, whom he only describes as being "a man, uptown" (*Perestroika* 4:3 228). Both of these topics are presented as being of personal importance to Belize and, therefore, none of Louis's--or, apparently, the audience's--business. Belize's race, on the other hand, is both personal, in the sense that he is personally attacked because of it, and political in the central role it plays in his arguments with Louis and Roy.

We see this centrality best in Belize's conversations with Roy Cohn, who is under Belize's care in the AIDS ward. While Belize helps Roy make decisions about his treatment out of a sense of "solidarity," Roy only recognizes their differences. His racist attack on Belize begins as soon as he sees him and demands a white nurse instead (*Perestroika* 1:5 156). Even after Belize says he is gay, Roy's attacks continue to be predominantly racial, even though Roy is in the closet. Indeed, Belize only responds to the racial insults. In the scene in which the two discuss Roy's stockpile of AZT, Roy begins by interspersing sexual slurs with racial ones, all running

⁴⁷ Prior has done drag in the past, but both in the scene in which he appears in drag (*Millennium Approaches* 1:7) and at the drag queen's funeral in *Perestroika* (2:1), he shows great distaste for drag.

together--"nigger cunt spade faggot lackey"--only to change to punctuated, exclusively racial ones as Belize's anger intensifies: "Mongrel. Dingo. Slave. Ape." Roy only stops his tirade, and gives up some of his pills, when Belize calls him a kike (3:2 191). This is the only time Roy gains the upper hand in the scenes they share, each of which is an intense battle of wills. Belize counters Roy's disparagement of him by pointing out that he is the one with power. Preparing to draw blood, he tells Roy, "You don't talk that way to me when I'm holding something this sharp. Or I might slip and stick it in your heart"(1:5 156). His most profound attack on Roy's racist ideology comes when Roy, high on morphine, asks Belize to describe Heaven. Belize tells him, "all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers [. . .] race, taste, and history finally overcome. And you ain't there"(3:6 210). Belize's idea of heaven is not so much an erasure of race as of white supremacy, the ultimate rebuttal to Roy, whose very dismissal of racism--"I save my hate for what counts"--is, itself, racist (1:5 159). While these scenes are riveting for an audience, they are not meant to be instructive, as are Bernard's remarks about racism. Given that Roy does not use racial slurs in scenes with any other characters, it is possible that their only objective is to manipulate his nurse, but even if this were not the case, his racism, like his anti-Communist, homophobic virulence, is part of what makes him a despicable character. If the audience can feel itself to be gay-friendly simply by admiring Prior, it is equally easy to feel anti-racist by despising Roy.

The definition of racism that Roy fits is not only common, it is comforting in that it likely excludes much of the play's white audience, but another understanding of racism allows for a very different reading of Belize's encounters with white people. As Dariek Scott argues about representations of interracial couples, "'Racist' is understood in this kind of discourse as a

totalizing identity---i.e., he is evil---rather than as a way of describing a person who, because of his skin color, at a minimum accrues benefits from, and cannot be innocent of, the repertory of endlessly circulating racist belief"(313). According to Scott's second definition, racism is a quality all white people share, particularly when they fail to acknowledge the privilege that accompanies their whiteness. The latter definition encompasses not only Louis, but the play's gay saint, Prior. It is only in his scenes with Prior that Belize appears to have anything in common with Bernard besides his race and sexuality. While Belize sees Prior at his most petulant and hopeless, he is never critical of him in the way he is with Roy and Louis. Occasionally, he even allows Prior to make the kinds of racial comments he does not tolerate from anyone else. When Prior calls him "ma belle negre," Belize ignores the racial objectification and says, "all this girl talk shit is politically incorrect, you know. We should have dropped it back when we gave up drag" (*Millennium Approaches* 2:5 67). While their past as drag performers is clearly part of the bond the two men share, Belize's racial difference is not a topic for conversation. This becomes explicit in *Perestroika* when Prior describes the Angel's message. When Belize raises an objection to the prohibition against migration, citing slavery as a forced migration, Prior tells him, "I hardly think it's appropriate for you to get *offended*, I didn't invent this shit it was *visited* on me"(2:2 180 italics original). While Prior's remarks may not seem racist in comparison with Roy's, it is troubling that the only real conversations about race take place between black and Jewish characters;⁴⁸ the self-described WASP is somehow beyond this topic.

⁴⁸ According to Minwalla, it is Jewishness, not Blackness, that is racialized in this play.

Belize tolerates Prior's remarks because, like Bernard, he is too concerned about his friend's physical and mental well-being to prioritize his own needs. While Bernard is certainly more often passive than Belize, the latter does not fulfill the paradigm of the strong, articulate black gay man as Minwalla regards him. In part, this is because he is never able to speak to a point at which these two identities intersect. Even when he tries to do so, as when he describes himself as a black drag queen to Louis, he is not allowed to finish. In an essay contemporary with *Angels in America*, Scott describes the dilemma of trying to articulate a black gay identity: "'gay black,' therefore more 'gay' than 'black,' (which translates, a few links further along the chain of this logic, into not 'black' at all; 'black gay,' therefore more 'black' than 'gay,' as if the only option were subordinating on characteristic to another, as if identity cannot be expressed except as an undisturbed center around which satellite qualifiers revolve"(301). Although the racial politics of Crowley's representation of Bernard are problematic, this character seems to be written with the assumption that the qualifiers of his identity *cannot* be pulled apart. In the conversation with Dahlbeck's mother, and the regret it promotes, it is impossible to tell where Bernard's sexual shame begins and his racial shame ends, or vice versa. While Bernard is overcome by this shame--which provides a convenient excuse for Crowley to get him out of the way and focus on what he deems the more crucial struggles of the white gay men--Belize disavows shame altogether. Showing the complexity of black gay men's lives is not part of his function. In one of the most comical scenes in *Perestroika*, Belize says, "I am trapped in a world of white people, that's *my* problem" (4:2 225 italics original). It is a problem, but Kushner does not bother to explore it. While certainly more

politically correct, *Angels* does not provide the uncomfortable, messy, thought-provoking examination of intersectionality that *Boys*, perhaps unwittingly, offers.

Closet cases

So far, I have focused on the ways in which both plays represent gayness as it intersects with visible difference in the forms of effeminacy and blackness, arguing that Emory and Bernard in *The Boys in the Band* expose and shame the racism and homophobia that other characters, and the audience, seek to disavow. On the other hand, *Angels in America* puts its effeminate and black characters at the center, albeit in very different roles, while assuming the audience will be disgusted by the bigotry expressed against them onstage. What these four characters have in common, however, is that their visibility makes them minorities within the gay communities the plays present. Most of the men in both plays can pass as straight, and most of Crowley's characters do. The difference is related to the time of production--the dominant culture was far more tolerant of homosexuality thirty years after Stonewall than one year before--but also to the fact that the two plays offer very different arguments about the nature of the closet itself.

According to Eve Sedgwick in her seminal work, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, understandings of the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality fall into two categories. Minoritizing refers to the idea that this distinction is "of active importance to a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority" while the "universalizing" view holds that it is "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities"(1). In *Boys*, we see the universalizing view; in fact, the closet plays a role in every character's identity. The only one of the openly gay characters who claims to have

never had to come out is Emory, to whom Michael says, "Everyone's always known it about you"(95), a few lines before asking him, "who would want to go to bed with a flaming little sissy like you?"(97). The implication is that Emory is unattractive precisely because of his inability to pass. In Kushner's community, however, the reverse is true. All of the central male characters are gay, and this becomes obvious to the audience fairly early on, even with the characters who are closeted. The characters who are least interested in passing, Prior and Belize, are presented as the wisest and bravest, while closeted Joe Pitt is condemned with even more fervor than Roy Cohn.⁴⁹ While these characters are also linked by their conservative politics, it is Joe's disavowal of his homosexuality that punishes his wife, Harper, and infuriates Louis. Harper tells Joe in *Millennium Approaches*, "You think you're the only one who hates sex? I do; I hate it with you; I do. I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints fall apart like wax [. . .] It's a sin, and it's killing us both"(1:8 43). Louis is as horrified by Joe's closetedness, and his connection to Roy Cohn, as he is by his homophobic court decisions; near the end of his tirade in *Perestroika*, he tells Joe, "He's got AIDS! Did you even know that? Stupid closeted bigots, you probably never even figured out that each other was . . . [. . .] Fascist hypocrite lying filthy . . ."(4:8 243). In *Boys*, the closet is a refuge in a homophobic world; in *Angels*, it is a hideout for cowards and hypocrites. This difference clearly reflects the progress made by the gay rights movement; however, there is more at stake in this progress than a gay playwright's occasion to congratulate himself and his gay peers on how far they have come. It also take a minoritizing stance with allows the straight male audience to view the considerable traffic surrounding the

⁴⁹ Roy receives forgiveness from Belize, Louis, and even the historical figure Ethel Rosenberg in whose conviction and execution he played an instrumental role; Joe receives forgiveness from no one.

closet in this play from a comfortable distance as outsiders. *The Boys in the Band* does not allow this luxury.

In *Angels*, homosexuality is a profound, essential truth about oneself. Harper has her suspicions about Joe's sexuality confirmed in a dream sequence with Prior in which he claims that a "blue streak of recognition" has confirmed this about him (*Millennium Approaches* 1:6 39). Neither Joe's sexuality, nor any other man's in the play, is presented as in any way ambiguous.⁵⁰ Even though Roy and Joe are both closeted, neither is able to keep his sexuality hidden from others, and Roy hardly tries.⁵¹ There are three possible positions for men to inhabit: out and proud, closeted and self-loathing, sexually undefined. The lines separating sexual identities in *The Boys in the Band* are far more blurred. This is most obviously the case with Alan. I would argue that a viewer's understanding of the representational politics of this play can best be gauged by his or her response to this character. Those who see it in mostly negative terms as a plea for sympathy on behalf of a despised minority, such as Vito Russo and Timothy Scheie, see Alan as straight.⁵² Clum acknowledges the ambiguity surrounding Alan's sexuality only to criticize it as not going far enough: "The play hints--merely hints--that Alan's leaving his wife and his behavior at Alan's party are signs of homosexual panic [. . .] Even if Alan has acknowledged homosexual impulses, the play does not question his return to a heterosexual life; it has to be happier than what he has seen at Michael's party and, after all, Alan has children"(205). What Clum fails to recognize is that while Alan may be the only character who claims to be straight, he is not the only one who has a wife and children. Hank,

⁵⁰ Hannah's sexuality is ambiguous. Her disgust with men does not make her queer, but it hardly makes her straight either.

⁵¹ He admits to his doctor that he has sex with men, but threatens to ruin his career if he calls him a homosexual (*Millennium Approaches* 1:9).

⁵² Scheie describes him as "the sole straight character"(1).

the guest with whom Alan bonds over the course of the evening, tells him, "I left my wife and children for Larry [his lover, who is also a guest at the party]"(94). Alan refuses to believe this and is horrified when Hank wins the game of truth by outing himself and Larry to their landlady. As Russo argues, "what scares Alan and the audience, what they could not come to terms with or understand, is the homosexuality of Hank and Larry [. . .] who are both just as queer as Emory yet 'look' as straight as Alan"(175). Russo also points out that these are the two characters most often ignored by the film's/play's critics, a trend that continues in the twenty-first century in Scheie's article and Clum's book. What makes Alan, the audience, and the critics so uncomfortable with this pair is the challenge they pose to strict binary modes of reading sexuality. They confound the boundaries between gay and straight, and closeted and out. After all, if we cannot be certain of the heterosexuality of a man in his thirties with a wife and children, when can we be certain?

While much of the conversation about the closet in the play focuses on Hank and Alan, the impossibility of irrefutable proof of heterosexuality is something most of the gay characters take for granted. When Alan incredulously suggests that Hank cannot be gay because he is married, Michael, Larry, Emory, and Cowboy all laugh at him (81).⁵³ At the same time, most of these characters are uninterested in proving that anyone is gay. When Bernard tells his story about Peter Dahlbeck, neither he nor anyone else attempts to read this single instance as evidence of Dahlbeck's true sexuality. In fact, Larry's response is, "with the right wine and the right music there're damn few who aren't curious"(82). These examples express a more

⁵³ This is the only time Cowboy, who spends most of the play dodging verbal barbs from Michael, takes part in ridiculing anyone. As the character on whom the most shame is heaped--even the most shamed characters in the play, Harold and Emory, treat him as an object--it is interesting that even he has the advantage over Alan.

universalizing view of homosexuality (Sedgwick); while only a few people are recognizably gay, anyone might have homosexual desires. This view allows for a very different reading of Alan's declaration when accused by Michael of having an affair with Justin Stuart: "if you are insinuating that I am a homosexual, I can only say that you are mistaken"(103). Is Alan denying an affair with Justin or a sexual identity? In Crowley's play, these are not one and the same.

However, even critics who recognize the ambiguity of Alan's character seek to impose binary oppositions on the way in which he can be understood. Kushner describes the audience as having to make a choice with regards to this character, who ends the game of "Truth" by calling his wife, with whom he has had a quarrel, to tell her that he is coming back home:

We don't know if Alan's mostly straight or mostly a liar. We leave the theatre not knowing which. None of the characters knows the answer either--maybe not even Alan. Michael's fierce need or desire for Alan to be gay is not sated. The audience must wonder: Are these gay men silent because they're demoralized and abashed in the face of triumphant heterosexual love; or are they silence by Alan's defeat, by the spectacle of the closet door being slammed shut? Reaction asserts itself in the first possibility, progress in the second. (xiii)

According to Kushner, it is left to the audience to decide if Hank is gay or straight, but I would argue that not only is it impossible to make that decision due to the lack of evidence in favor of either, it is also too simple to read Alan's story as either reactionary or progressive. Whether Alan returns wholeheartedly to his wife or continues to harbor homosexual desires, neither he nor the audience can claim ignorance of the complexities of gay relationships, or even of the fact that such relationships exist. In the same way, Joe Pitt in *Angels in America* can no longer

pretend to love his wife after living with Louis. He tells her, "But I have changed. I don't know how yet"(5:8 272). Certainly Joe has changed from the beginning of the play, in much more obvious ways than Alan, but Alan's tiny step towards understanding in his apology to Emory is met with forgiveness, while, as Clum points out, "Joe's capacity for love, his complexity, his wish, however misdirected, for a redeemed and redemptive society, count for nothing in Kushner's scheme"(263). The difference between Kushner's scheme and Crowley's is that, for the former, the worst thing a gay man can do is profit by denying his true sexuality, while for Crowley, it is to attack and shame other gays in order to shore up one's own respectability. Apart from a change in what counts as respectability, if we read *Angels* by the light of Crowley's logic, the character who is least worthy of forgiveness is Louis, who abandons his lover so soon after Prior is diagnosed with AIDS and then baits Joe into attacking him in the hopes that it will convince Prior to take him back.

If in *Angels*, the ultimate evil is denying one's true self to others, in *Boys* it is cruelty to those one is expected to support. After Michael has spent the evening berating his friends, Harold tells Michael something about himself. Speaking, in Crowley's stage directions, "calmly, coldly, clinically," he says:

You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. [. . .] You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life--if you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate--but you will always be a homosexual--but you will always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. (108)

Here, Harold is attacking in Michael the same trait that many of the play's critics attack in all of its characters. According to Vito Russo, "the speech captured the essence of self-hatred and summed up a generation of gay men who were taught to blame all their troubles on their homosexuality"(176). Tony Kushner, writing two decades later, sees the speech in a very nearly opposite light, writing, "[Harold's] 'always' is a predecessor to 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it' [. . .] We aren't essences, but we are relationships: We are who we love. And the desire to alter that, to eradicate that, as Harold makes all but explicit, is the desire to annihilate, to kill or to die"(xv). Harold's choice of annihilation, as Kushner acknowledges, applies as much to Michael's treatment of the other guests as to himself. He is not punished for being closeted, but for violating the queer prohibition against passing judgment that Michael Warner describes. By this point in the play, even Alan knows Michael is gay. Outness is not a guarantor of pride any more than closetedness is of self-loathing. What makes Michael subject to Harold's reproof is that he is cruel to those characters who are furthest from the normative standard of the straight world: Bernard, Emory, and Cowboy, the masculine hustler whom Emory brings to the party as Harold's present. Ultimately, Michael's greatest flaw is presented as being his complicity in the heterosexist denigration of those who cannot hide their difference, but what *Boys* is able to show its audience, and *Angels* is not, is where this denigration originates. It is not a character flaw that inheres in gay people; it is learned from straight culture in painfully direct, intimate ways. The key to growth and change is not behaving in ways that appeal to straight tolerance, as Michael makes plain when he tells Donald: "if we could just . . . not hate ourselves so much. That's it, you know. If we could just *learn* not to hate ourselves quite so very much" (111). In one way, this statement seems to justify the opinions of critics who see

the play's characters as maudlin victims, as though Michael is blaming gays for their own oppression. However, Michael can also be understood as placing on gays' shoulders the responsibility of changing their perceptions of themselves and each other, of unlearning the hatred taught by the dominant culture. Perhaps Michael is asserting that it does not matter what straight people think, as long as it does not harm the bonds gay men share among themselves.

Conclusion

In comparing these two plays, we should not simply look to the past to vindicate the present, but instead consider the new problems that progress has created. Their difference is far more complex than that of an angst-ridden historical relic versus a positive, progressive modern text. In fact, I would argue that *The Boys in the Band* offers a thoughtful commentary on several issues that continue to inspire volatile debate in queer communities today, while *Angels in America*, at least in its representation of the lives of people with AIDS, is very much of its time. More to my purpose, however, is that while *The Boys in the Band* clearly predates any popular discourse of gay pride or gay normalcy, *Angels in America* reflects the burgeoning new homonormativity that would eventually come to dominate gay and lesbian rights discourse by the late 1990s. By examining these two plays in conjunction, we can see that not only has the new homonormativity made little progress in resolving the longstanding concerns of effeminophobia and racism, it has created new hierarchies and exclusions. To paraphrase Frank Kamney's slogan "Gay is good," which enjoyed enormous popularity in the decade following *The Boys in the Bands'* opening, gay may be good in the world of *Angels in America*

and the new homonormativity of today, but some gays are better than others. (Charles Kaiser, 190).

Conclusion

In these four chapters, I have attempted to uncover the limitations that characterize representations of gay men in mainstream film, drama, and television. In the two-thousand teens, representations of queer people, including lesbians and people of color, are more common than ever, but this does mean acceptance when the same stereotypes of queer people as comic relief or victims exploited in the 1990s continue to be the predominant representational tropes. At the same time, seeing gay people at seemingly every turn does not make straight consumers of mainstream texts gay-friendly unless they are also thinking about how gay people's histories, relationships, and access to privilege are different from their own. Most mainstream texts do not depict queers in ways that raise questions about these issues; instead, they shore up straight privilege by placing straight characters at the center stage of what are purported to be gay storylines. While overt homophobes are usually villains, those who protect and defend the queer victims are invariably straight, which in turn reifies the victim status of gays, who are presented as incapable of defending themselves or each other.

Gays are not only limited by their roles within texts, but by the lack of demographic diversity in these representations. While more gay people of color appear in mainstream texts than ever before, in many cases, all they do is appear. For example, in its fourth season, *Glee* features an African American transgendered teen girl named Unique. While she is included in most of the episodes, she says very little in most of her scenes and remains anonymous in her only major storyline until the final episode of the season.⁵⁴ In other cases, as we see in *Angels in America*, queers of color occupy central roles, but are only permitted to speak about one aspect

⁵⁴ A male student, Ryder, is involved in a "catfish" scam in which he befriends someone he believes is a girl from another school online, but she turns out to be Unique with a fictional profile.

of their identities. Far more often, mainstream gays of color are positioned as sidekicks or devoted but silenced partners as in *Philadelphia*. Showing diversity falls far short of respecting it. Respect will only be achieved when writers create characters that discuss and debate, for example, what it means to be gay *and* black, or lesbian *and* working class. Such a focus on the intersectionality of queer identity could potentially work to render the easy consumption of difference by majority audiences difficult, if not impossible.

While depictions of queers as victims and/or the passive recipients of straight tolerance and the silencing, if not the full erasure, of queer diversity has a long history on the American screen, stage, and small screen, the new homonormativity has created a new kind of gay characters, including gay villain. Of course, there is nothing new about gay villains as such; devilish queers have been reaffirming the health and normality of heterosexuality since the 1930s.⁵⁵ However, the new gay villains are defined as such by an ideology that deems gays good, as long as they behave themselves. I use gay, rather than queer, in this case because the new gay villain is often a white male who is openly gay.⁵⁶ If he is not out, as is the case with *Angels in America*'s Roy Cohn, his closetedness is an important part of his villainy. What makes these gay villains different from their predecessors is that they are not condemned because of their sexuality, but because of their failure meet the standards of acceptable gay behavior dictated by the gay mainstream. Closetedness is one such failing, but promiscuity, as we see with *Glee*'s Sebastian Smythe, is another. Condemning these characters for choices that actual

⁵⁵ Henry Benshoff's work on the monstrous queer in classic Hollywood film would be a good source to cite in the final draft. **Find title and publication info.**

⁵⁶ **Gay vs. Queer**

gay people make daily is another way in which the gay mainstream shuts down the potential for diversity.

All of these problems are deeply entrenched in mainstream gay representations, but marginal, independent texts provide examples of rich, multi-faceted portrayals of gay people from which the mainstream can, hopefully, eventually, learn. Many of these texts were produced in the 1990s, such as *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye's fictional study of black stereotypes and lesbian identity in 1930s Hollywood films, and Greg Arraki's *The Living End*, a travel narrative about two young gay men with AIDS who attack homophobes. However, recent queer independent films continue to provide these kinds of complex portrayals, as we see in Greg Arraki's 2004 film *Mysterious Skin*, in which the hero is a working class, gay, teenaged hustler from Kansas. While this character is troubled, he is never presented as a victim because of his sexuality or his class. Although these films were well-reviewed at their releases, and have become available to a much larger audience because of such wide circulating online libraries such as Netflix, their audiences remain much smaller than those for films like *Philadelphia* and shows like *Glee*.

What all of these figures from independent queer cinema have in common is that they seem to have been written with no thought for giving straight viewers positive images of themselves accompanying the images of gay characters with which they are expected to sympathize. In the case of Arraki's films, the gay heroes are not even particularly likeable. In this conclusion, I address the question of how mainstream audiences might react to gay characters that they are not expected to like. Real progress in gay representation will come

when writers have the courage to create multi-faceted, complex gay characters that resonate with the wide variety of lived experiences gay audiences have, that are not designed simply to cater to the pleasure and comfort of a majority audience

Downton Abbey

I have chosen as my final subject a text that offers an example of a writer moving, if only temporarily, in the progressive direction I describe. *Downton Abbey* is a British export, airing on PBS in the United States, that has had enormous success among both viewers and critics in America. While it might best be described as an early twentieth-century soap opera, *Downton Abbey*, named after the large country house in which the characters interact, is not only occupied with the leisure-class characters' pursuit of heterosexual romance, but also the role of class in all relationships, including cross-class romantic ones. While most of the relationships between the Crawleys and their servants are amicable, one servant in particular remains isolated both upstairs and downstairs. Indeed, if it were not for Thomas Barrow's snide comments and ambitious schemes, *Downton Abbey* would appear to be a class relations Utopia. While Thomas's class resentment is endlessly commented on by other characters, another reason for his resentment is barely spoken of until season three: his homosexuality. The show's creator Julian Fellowes, sets a difficult task for himself: how to present homosexuality as an invisible, criminalized identity to an audience for which it is commonplace? Perhaps because of this extra challenge, Fellowes manages to create a gay character that is more complex than many of the more politically correct examples I have discussed.

We discover Thomas's sexuality in the first episode of season one, when he serves as valet to a young duke with whom he has had an affair. When the duke refuses to offer Thomas a job, Thomas attempts to blackmail him with some incriminating letters he received from him. As was the case with many working class homosexuals of this era, Thomas faces the double threat of exploitation by leisure class men and the possibility of blackmail from everyone, including his working-class peers.⁵⁷ In another episode, Thomas flirts with, and attempts to kiss a Turkish diplomat, who blackmails Thomas into taking him to the eldest daughter's bedroom. These scenes expose not only the illegality of his homosexuality, but the callous sense of self-preservation it cultivates in him. For the first two seasons, he bullies and exploits everyone lower in status than himself, while undermining and falsely accusing those who outrank him. Of all the servants, Thomas only has one friend, a middle-aged lady's maid named Ms. O'Brien, who is even more manipulative and ruthless than him. For all of these reasons, Thomas is most often described by fans and reviewers as the character "we love to hate."

Whenever this negative view of Thomas comes up in interviews, creator Julian Fellowes encourages viewers not to judge Thomas too harshly. His attitude has remained consistent through the show's three seasons. In a 2011 *New York Times* article, he said, "It's hard to be gay in 1912 [. . .]It's illegal. If anyone finds out, you go to prison. So for me, him being gay means you slightly stay your hand. He's not just horrible. To get any kind of emotional life going, he's got to take his life in his hands every time. That seems to me to be a sympathetic

⁵⁷ According to Matt Cook, "The homosexual subculture and condition was cast as decadent; one in which the working class could only 'pose' as 'sharers'. When they appeared in reports of homosexual activity, it was as sexually pliant adjuncts, underscoring prevailing assumptions about a sexually dissipated aristocracy and working class who were either grasping or vulnerable to corruption on account of their lack of moral agency. Working class men were apparently unable to shape their sexual lives in London except as renters of blackmailers"(39).

thing”(Witchell). In a 2012 interview with gay website AfterElton.com, Fellowes repeated these sentiments: "It doesn't matter how WASPish he is. You have a kind of fundamental sympathy for someone who's making their life against those kinds of odds and that's why he's one of my favorite characters. (pbs-at-tcas-downton-abbey). These comments precede the start of season three, in which Fellowes makes a much more explicit attempt to present Thomas as a sympathetic character than in either of the previous seasons. In the final interview I am citing, his comments suggest that, after season three's run in America in the winter of 2013, he considers his goal as achieved. He says of Thomas, "I also felt it was believable that someone living under that pressure would be quite snippy and ungenerous and untrusting. But once you understood what he was up against, you'd forgive quite a lot of that. I like to write characters where you change your mind, without them becoming different people"(Itzkoff). When looking at these three comments together, several shifts become apparent. The impetus behind Fellowes' portrayal of Thomas has clearly not changed; however, the writer becomes increasingly confident that his audience will respond to this character in the same way he does. He moves from subjectively telling us that he finds Thomas sympathetic to assuming that the audience will "forgive" Thomas once we understand him. Perhaps Fellowes has become more confident over these three years because his expectations of his audience have lowered. In seasons one and two, he tried to educate his audience about the plight of homosexual men in the early 20th century, but in season three, he follows the well-trod path of so many mainstream texts by making Thomas a passive object of heterosexual pity. Having given up on trying to make the audience empathize with a gay character, he recreates Thomas in strict accordance with a trope his audience finds familiar and comforting: the tragic gay victim.

In season three, Thomas finds himself "drawn" to a young footman named Jimmy Kent. After being convinced by Ms. O'Brien that the feeling is mutual, he goes to Jimmy's bedroom one night while Jimmy is asleep and kisses him. Jimmy wakes, just as another footman named Alfred enters the room too, and hysterically pushes Thomas out. Ms. O'Brien persuades Alfred, her nephew, to report Thomas to the butler, Mr. Carson. While she has persuaded Jimmy to tolerate Thomas's advances before in the hopes of a promotion--Thomas is Lord Grantham's temporary valet-- she now counsels him to insist Thomas be fired without a reference, which would make finding work at another house impossible, or he will go to the police, bringing scandal to the house.

So far, this is largely in line with the historical situation Fellowes describes in the interviews. However, the next episode brings on a turn of events that would have been quite alien to early twentieth century Britain, but very much at home in the tolerant mainstream of the early twenty-first century in America. Mr. Bates, the person whom Thomas antagonizes the most in seasons one and two, becomes interested in this situation, and determines that O'Brien is to blame. So, he tells Lord Grantham, and then goes to Thomas for evidence to use against his former friend. Thomas, utterly resigned to his fate, tells Bates he is "well and truly beaten," but, after much prodding, he reveals Ms. O'Brien's most incriminating secret.⁵⁸ This is the last we hear from Thomas in this episode. In the remainder, the police arrive to collect Thomas at the behest of Alfred, only to be turned away by Lord Grantham, and Thomas is promoted to under-butler. The show's creators deem Thomas's reaction to both of these occurrences too

⁵⁸ This is that she caused Lady Grantham to have a miscarriage in season one by placing a wet bar of soap on the floor next to her bathtub so she would step on when she got out.

insignificant to show, while Bates' disappointment that Thomas now outranks him is important enough to be registered twice.

As the length of this summary reveals, there is more gay content in the final two episodes of season three than in the previous two seasons combined. However, these episodes aptly illustrate the notion that, when the makers of popular culture are uninformed about a queer history and oblivious to queer perspectives, more queer content only means a wider margin for ignorance and exploitation. I have chosen to begin in reverse, with my analysis of season three, and end with seasons one and two because season three has provoked much more discussion and debate about the topic of gay representation. However, I argue that seasons one and two offer a far more progressive example of the direction in which the creators of gay representations might move. In the first two seasons, Thomas is the ultimate outsider in the social order of *Downton Abbey*, but Fellowes places much of the responsibility for this on the homophobia of that order. In season three, however, Thomas's narrative becomes a means of reinforcing and justifying the very order that oppresses him. While Fellowes is adept at presenting the threats that existed for gay men in this historical era, he neglects the pervasive, socially mandated homophobia behind them. The notion several characters posit that Thomas's sexuality should be overlooked because it not a choice relates to the tendency Suzanna Danuta Walters notices in American television: "Homosexuality can only be a problem if the heterosexual majority constructs it that way. But what you mostly see on television is the problem of homosexuality without the cause [. . .] if TV only shows us *homosexuality* as a problem, it participates in the erasure of the real problem of *homophobia*" (79).. We see this erasure, and the justification of the social order, in three choices Fellowes

makes concerning who bears the burden of representing homophobia, who gets to be the heroes, and how anti-homophobic views are presented.

On the show, the character that bears the full responsibility for Thomas's downfall is Ms. O'Brien. However, even though she tells her nephew, Alfred, that Thomas has "broken every law of God and man," she is motivated less by homophobia than by unjustified malevolence. As Bates points out when he invites O'Brien to tea to blackmail her, "you've known about Mr. Barrow all along, so what's changed now?" I want to suggest that Ms. O'Brien is the villain here because her culpability in Thomas's ruin poses less of a threat to the social hierarchy that oppresses both of them than anyone else's could. Historically, the cause of queer men's suffering lay largely with the judicial system and religious ideology. Both are institutions that O'Brien exploits skillfully, but in which authority lies entirely with men, the very group with which the audience is most encouraged to identify and respect. Indeed, the young men who help to engineer Thomas's ruin are presented simply as Ms. O'Brien's pawns. Alfred tells Mr. Carson what happened between Thomas and Jimmy under her orders, and it most likely due to her influence that he reports Thomas to the police.⁵⁹ Even Jimmy's insistence that he "won't turn a blind eye to sin" merely echoes her rhetoric. Both footmen escape being labeled as bigots because, presumably, they are too young to know their own minds

At the same time, the only character presented as truly homophobic--the unabashedly reactionary butler, Mr. Carson-- comes off as being too old and out of touch to be otherwise. When Jimmy tells him that these times are more liberal, Carson replies, "I've never been called

⁵⁹ In the Christmas special, set a year later, no trace of Alfred's homophobia remains. He chides Jimmy for being unkind to Thomas because "he won't let anyone say a word against you."

a liberal in my life, and I don't intend to start now." Indeed, he reacts to the kiss, and Thomas's attempt to explain it, by telling him "you should be horsewhipped," and refusing "to take a tour of [Thomas's] revolting world." Fellowes responds to a question about downstairs characters' negative reactions to Thomas by saying, "Well, I think it's a mistake to give people modern attitudes if you want them to remain sympathetic, because I think the audience picks up on that. If Carson had said, 'Oh, yes, I think it's absolutely fine,' that's a 2013 response." However, he fails in historical accuracy because Carson is actually the only character on the show who reflects attitudes toward homosexuality in 1920. Both in his writing for the show and in interviews, Fellowes reveals his own investment in a distinctly modern attitude. He tells David Itzkoff, "My parents didn't have any prejudice about this at all, actually. In fact, my brother's godfather was gay, quite publicly, which in the 50s was pretty wild. This was a good friend of my father's. He was liberal. It didn't bother him if people were homosexual. But we can forget how we were ringed in with these prejudices until really quite recently" (Itzkoff). Leaving aside, for a moment, Fellowes' confidence that homophobia no longer exists, I am intrigued by his insistence that, even in the 1950s, his family was free from the taint of homophobia. Fellowes, like many gay-friendly straights, sees homophobia as a serious problem that only exists for other people. Even other people's homophobia is presented as somewhat innocuous; there is nothing remarkable about this trait in Carson. He is as perturbed by the Crawley's youngest daughter marrying the family chauffeur and the housekeeper purchasing an electric toaster as he is by the discovery of Thomas's sexuality. When he tells Thomas, "you have been twisted by nature into something foul, but even I can see that you did not ask for it," it is easy to believe he intends to sound compassionate.

As in so many mainstream representations of gay men's troubles, this kind of begrudging tolerance is presented as an unequivocal good, and this is never more apparent than in Lord Grantham and Bates' response to Thomas's situation. Their tolerance has been a source of much debate surrounding this season, with viewers questioning not the virtue of this tolerance, but its believability. An article on Slate.com informs the reader that "Last night's episode of *Downton Abbey* has turned Slate commenters into historians. Dozens of readers are arguing about the credibility of [Thomas's] plot line"(Thomas). One can only hope that some of these commenters were more credible historians than June Thomas, the article's author. She claims that that Robert's assertion upon hearing what Jimmy has done, "If I had screamed blue murder every time someone tried to kiss me at Eton, I'd have gone hoarse in a month," is "one of the few things that isn't anachronistic about *Downton Abbey*." What is anachronistic, and deeply problematic in both the show and this article, is the conflation of all homosexual practices under one meaning. As many scholars of gay history point out, same-sex activity was tolerated in elite prep schools such as Eton, under the strict understanding that the boys would set aside "youthful indiscretions" once they left school and become heterosexually productive members of society.⁶⁰ In *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, Jeffrey Weeks describes one of the many types of homosexuality he defines as "situational:" "activity that may be regarded as legitimate in certain circumstances [. . .] but which is taboo in the wider society"(34). Sex between boys at school "might or might not have been the prelude to a later homosexual life-style, but it was acceptable within the narrow community of the school"(35). If tolerance of homosexuality generally was what young men

⁶⁰ Thomas's lover, the Duke of Crowborough, uses this exact phrase to describe his behavior during the London season in which their affair took place as he is breaking up with Thomas.

from aristocratic and more privileged middle-class learned at Eton, it is likely that the laws would have looked very different than they did. Lord Grantham's role in Thomas's storyline--or, rather, Thomas's role in Lord Grantham's--has less to do with accurately reflecting aristocratic views of homosexuality than with asserting the role of the aristocratic as benefactor.

While this lionization of Lord Grantham is reflective of the show's classism, it is not only the lord of the manor who is thus privileged. John Bates, Lord Grantham's regular valet, has been presented as the show's moral center for three seasons. For most of season three, he is imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. When his wife asks why he wants save his former enemy, he says he "wouldn't wish [prison] on any man," and, in a later scene, explains, "I know what it's like to feel powerless." These exchanges works to equalize Bates and Thomas's situations, further ennobling the first and minimizing the latter. It is ironic, because Bates makes this claim while he and his wife are painting the cottage in which they will live rent free, courtesy of Lord Grantham. How can being punished for a few months for something no one believes one did, and being lavishly rewarded upon release, possibly be compared to a lifetime of being punished with invisibility and the threat of imprisonment because of one's identity? The show is not concerned with the latter injustice.

Neither is it concerned, ultimately, with Thomas's perspective on his situation. This is not to say that his views are not registered. When Mr. Carson confronts him with his actions towards Jimmy, Thomas does not deny them or apologize; he says, "when you're like me, you have to read the signs as best you can, because no one dares speak out." According to openly gay television writer Richard Kramer, "this moment didn't feel anachronistic, or GLAAD-

approved, or even brave; it felt *true*. He wasn't begging for scraps from the tolerance table. He was saying *This is who I am, whether or not anything happened, and whether or not you approve*" (italics original). One thing that has remained consistent throughout the show's three seasons has been Thomas's refusal to blame his troubles on his sexuality. Another such moment comes in the following episode after Mr. Carson calls him foul; he says, "I'm not foul Mr. Carson. I'm not the same as you, but I'm not foul." Although this moment is brief, quiet, and subtle, Thomas's meaning is clear. The problem in his life is men like Mr. Carson and their hatred of difference. What is especially satisfying about this scene is that Carson is trying to be helpful, and Thomas is not accusing him of being callous or cruel. He is simply throwing Carson's tolerance back in his face.

Not all critics have understood the significance of this scene. June Thomas claims that the only anachronism apparent in this storyline is "Thomas's gay pride--or at least his refusal to hate himself," after she cites George Chanucey's groundbreaking work *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World: 1890-1940*, which argues against such hetero-centric, teleological thinking forcefully and at length:

Most gay men did not speak out against anti-gay policing so openly, but to take this as evidence of that they had internalized anti-gay attitudes is to ignore the strength of the forces arrayed against them, the misinterpret silence as acquiescence, and to construe resistance in the narrowest of terms [. . .] the history of gay resistance must be understood to extend beyond formal political

organizing to include the strategies of everyday resistance that men devised in order to make space for themselves in the midst of a hostile society. (5)

I would argue that Thomas's speech to Mr. Carson is just such an act of resistance. He knows he has nothing to gain by defending himself; he is not going to change Mr. Carson's mind. He does make it clear that he does not see himself as a victim or a sinner, but merely as someone pursuing the affection and gratification that most of the heterosexual characters take for granted.

This scene would be a remarkable reversal of the typical helpful heterosexual narrative if Thomas's story ended here, but, of course, it could not. Like all beneficiaries of helpful heterosexuality on television, Thomas is completely powerless to save himself. Therefore, the last perspective we get on Thomas's identity comes from Lord Grantham, who tells Alfred, "Thomas does not choose to be the way he is [. . .] Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." While this scene serves to highlight the lord's role as caring, paternalistic employer, it also makes it plain that he does see Thomas's sexuality as the cause of his troubles. In terms of the other responses to Thomas on the show, Lord Grantham is ideologically positioned between the two characters that come closest to being homophobic. His quotation of the Gospels to Alfred must be very confusing for the young footman, given that Ms. O'Brien appeals to Judeo-Christian beliefs to justify Thomas's punishment. His assertion that Thomas just cannot help the way he is echoes Mr. Carson's belief that Thomas has been "twisted by nature," as though his sexuality is a kind of affliction to be pitied as long as it does not interfere with his work. Although this speech saves Thomas, it does so by upholding the very ideologies

that justify his persecution and erasure. Rather than reflecting the socially mandated homophobia of the British 1920s, Fellowes manages to make Thomas's misfortunes an occasion for justifying the privileges men like Lord Grantham enjoyed.

Richard Kramer cites this classism of Fellowes' part as one of the failings of season three, but he is especially disappointed by the uneven way in which Thomas's storyline is handled: "They'd shown me how it is to be this man, in a way that was authentic, close to home, and real. And then, just minutes on, they snatched it out of my hand [. . .] taking this man Thomas Barrow, whom they'd let me see real, and reducing him once again to a cliché." Although Fellowes does not recognize this, one of the reasons why viewers like Kramer find the depiction of Thomas's life so resonant is that some of the forces working against him continue to harass gay people today. While homosexuality is no longer universally condemned and rendered invisible, gays must still contend with discrimination, heterosexual disgust, and forms of tolerance that are really thinly disguised homophobia. In this respect, the problem is not that *Downton Abbey* is anachronistic, but that the bigotries of the 1920s remain with us, albeit in less obvious forms.

From an anti-homophobic perspective, the failing of season three lies in the fact that it is, ultimately, not very interested in Thomas. It is much more interested in exploiting his plight to the advantage of heterosexuals, both on the show and in the viewing audience. Mr. Bates, exclaiming "Whoever would have thought I'd end up feeling sorry for Thomas?" upon hearing about the incident with Jimmy, identifies the transition many viewers made in season three from "lov[ing] to hate" Thomas to pitying him. What, really, is so different about these

positions? In the first, the characters and viewers draw pleasure from a sense of moral superiority to Thomas; in the second, they draw pleasure from righteous sympathy, also based on his supposed inferiority. I would argue, however, that the version of this character that inspires hatred is a far more anti-homophobic representation than the one that inspires pity. While, in season three, Thomas is, for the most part, helpless, in seasons one and two he draws hostility by refusing to behave in the ways straight audiences have come to expect of gay men. George Chauncey describes "tactics [that] did not directly challenge anti-gay policing, but in the face of that policing they allowed many gay men not just to survive but to flourish--to build happy, self-confident, and loving lives"(5). Many of the tactics Chauncey discusses relate to the creation of urban spaces in which gay men could gather to find friends and lovers, and these, of course, could not offer aid to an isolated gay man in Yorkshire, England in the same way they would to a large gay population in New York City. I want to argue, however, that what Thomas is pursuing through his deceit, manipulation, and other forms of agency is the kind of "happy, self-confident, loving" life that Chauncey describes. Like Nathan Leopold in Tom Kalin's *Swoon*, he "refuse[s] to accept the idea of suffering as [his] condition." In my reading of seasons one and two, I want to focus on two of Thomas's tactics of resistance: these are his pursuit of companionship, both sexual and emotional, and his opposition to the heteronormative social order.

A scene in season two reveals both of these tactics in unison. After serving in the medical corps in the trenches of northern France in World War I, Thomas returns to Downton Abbey's village to work as an orderly at the hospital. There, he forms a bond with an officer suffering from gas-blindness. When Lt. Courtenay is disinherited by his family, Thomas tells

him: "You're not a victim; don't let them make you into one. You've got to fight back." When Courtenay expresses skepticism, Thomas tells him, "You should believe me; all my life, they've pushed me around just because I'm different." While Thomas never explains to the officer how he is "different," and we never find out what their relationship might have turned into because Courtenay commits suicide, this is one of Thomas's most important scenes. Not only does it show his desire for closeness, it reveals his perception of both himself and the homophobic views of others. He is "different," not unnatural, evil, or, as another Downton servant describes him in season one, "a troubled soul." I would argue that this scene is even more powerful than the one with Mr. Carson in season three, because the later scene only provides us with a few anti-homophobic minutes in an episode that is otherwise a ringing endorsement of straight male power. The story of Thomas and the blind soldier comprises the entirety of queer content in season two, but it works to reveal Thomas's sexuality not only as something that makes him sympathetic, but as the source of a particular kind of wisdom about resisting discrimination from which anyone who is marginalized can learn, whether they are gay or not.

It is tempting to read the Courtenay narrative as a missed opportunity on Fellowes part; after all, if this story had taken place after the conversion of Downton Abbey into a convalescent home, Courtenay and Thomas might have been able to spend more time together. In season one, however, Thomas's frustrated desires for romance are used to make points about gay men's lives far more effectively than the similar storyline with Jimmy in season three. This is in part because Fellowes handles the concept of intersectionality with a more deft hand than many recent television writers and film-makers; it is impossible to fully understand the implications of Thomas's sexuality without considering his class status, and his class

resentment cannot be explained apart from the discrimination he faces because of his sexuality. The duke avoids being blackmailed by Thomas in the first episode by entering the servants' quarters and stealing the letters. While he clearly has more power than Thomas in some respects due to his class privilege, because of his criminalized sexuality he must resort to the same kind of trickery as his lover in order to protect himself. In the following episode, Thomas complains angrily about the unfairness of "them upstairs" encroaching on the servants' space. The other servants take this as reflecting the class resentment he alone seems to feel, but the audience is aware that he is also upset about his lover's betrayal.

While Thomas speaks about the unfairness of class privilege, the characters that are subject to his schemes and lies are those who, because of their heterosexuality, enjoy the kinds of relationships that he wants but cannot have. The kind of relationship that Lord Grantham has with Mr. Bates is likely what he wanted with the Duke of Crowborough--it is also not a "typical master-servant relationship," as the duke describes himself and Thomas--but their relationship is illegal because it has a sexual component, while Lord Grantham and Bates' is celebrated because it does not. Even Thomas's continued preoccupation with being a valet is likely rooted in his sexuality. Although he does not desire Lord Grantham, as his valet, he would accompany him to London frequently. As Matt Cook tells us in *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914*, London in the early twentieth was home to a large, if underground, network of gay meeting places that would have been completely foreign to Yorkshire. At the heart of Thomas's ambition is a desire for some degree of sexual freedom.

Since he spends most of his time at Downton, however, his most important relationships are with the other servants, all of whom are heterosexual. It is in these relationships that we see Thomas as his most transgressive. I focus on two examples from season one that highlight Thomas's opposition to the heteronormative ideologies to which the other characters attempt to impose on him. One is the idealization of young, heterosexual love, and the other is the reproductive futurism that Lee Edelman defines in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. With his refusal to comply with these ideologies, and the seemingly irreversible outsider status he occupies, Thomas exemplifies Edelman's figure of the sinthomosexual. When Thomas discovers that William, the second footman, has a crush on a kitchen maid, Daisy, he pretends to be interested in her himself. All of the older servants--who, somehow, know that Thomas is attracted to men--are appalled by this. William's unrequited feelings receive nearly unlimited support and sympathy, to the point that, in season two, the other servants compel Daisy to marry him on his death bed, while Thomas has to play a charade with his lover when he comes to visit so, he believes, no one will be suspicious. His antagonism towards William may be read not simply as personal but a desire to disrupt the workings of a system that privileges male heterosexuality.

Of course, the most dominant ideologies at work in *Downton Abbey* are those related to class and family. In the final episode of season one, Thomas defies both of these in ways that all of the characters and most viewers find intolerable. Lady Grantham suffers the miscarriage of a son who would have inherited the estate upon her husband's death. In a climactic downstairs scene, Thomas walks into the dining hall to find the other servants in deep mourning for what they consider to be a loss to their family. Completely unmoved, he says, "I'm

sure she'll be able to get over it; they're no bigger than a hamster at that stage." Everyone present replies to this comment with differing degrees of horror and disdain, but it is William, appropriately, who makes the most summative remark: "is there nothing sacred to you?" For William and the other servants, the value of continuity, for both the institutions of heterosexuality and the aristocracy, is the value that counts most. This scene makes explicit what has been implied throughout the season, that there is no place in this domestic unit, any more than in respectable British culture at large, for someone like Thomas, but it also makes it clear that he has no desire to assimilate. His reply to William is to make a joke about William's recent loss of his mother, at which the younger man knocks him down and begins punching him in the face. It is noteworthy that, for all of Thomas's transgressions over the course of the season, from blackmail and making unwanted advances to lying and stealing, the only real punishment he receives is for speaking against the dominant ideologies governing class and sexual relations. While *Fellowes* may intend Thomas to be read as a villain, there is nothing about his behavior that is difficult to explain when we consider the culture in which he lives and his view of it.

In season three, *Fellowes* invites viewers to take the impossibility of a gay romance in 1920 for granted. In fact, many storylines over these three seasons could have presented the plight of gay men in this era very effectively, had they been developed beyond a couple of scenes. Why did Thomas's affair with the duke end in the first episode rather than unfolding over the course of a season? Why could Thomas not have met Lieutenant Courtenay at the Downton convalescent home rather than the hospital? Why did Jimmy not return Thomas's affection? The answer to the last question especially helps to illuminate one of the darker

aspects of tolerance: that is far easier to tolerate a suffering homosexual than a happy one. People who are content with their lives and relationships do not need tolerance. From a narrative perspective, it is even more difficult to believe that Carson, Bates, and Lord Grantham would allow a gay romance in their home and workplace than that they would work together to save Thomas, so having Jimmy accept Thomas's advances would not do them any favors. Ultimately, the tragedy is not that gay men could not have loving relationships in the 1920s, this was not the case, but that, even in the two-thousand teens, writers are leery of presenting gay people as equal to their straight counterparts.

Nonetheless, *Downton Abbey* gestures in promising directions that, we can only hope, future television and film writers will bear out to their conclusions. One of these gestures is allowing Thomas to stand up for himself, and advocate for others to do the same. None of the other characters listen to him, but this is itself a strength of these storylines; he does not require straight endorsement, as Andrew Beckett does in *Philadelphia*. What is important is that the audience hears him. A good part of what the audience hears from him is anger at the situation he is in and those he holds responsible. While this anger motivates some unsavory actions, in itself, it is completely justifiable. It is easy to read characters like Thomas as catering to certain negative stereotypes of gay men as bitchy, deceitful, trouble-makers. However, I have argued that what is needed in mainstream texts is not more "positive representations," but a new way of thinking about what constitutes positive and negative representations. Currently, this distinction is based on what kinds of actions or characteristic help straight audiences like gay people and what kinds present obstacles to this goal. While these representations have helped to bring about an end to the vilification of gays and lesbians as

such in mainstream film, drama, and television, they have also created a hierarchy which echoes those that continue to exist in the mainstream culture at large, one that separates those who are in the privileged position of being pleased, and those whose visibility and even survival depends on their ability to please those in power. When gay artists and critics fail to challenge straight privilege, along with privileges associated with race, gender, and class, they condone the continued marginalization of many, if not most, gay people.

I have argued that the question should be, what kinds of representations challenge all viewers to recognize the complexity and diversity of gay lives, and what this reveals about their own identities. It is, apparently, very frightening for a mainstream audience to see gay men who know themselves, and know what they want, and go after it, but, in a truly anti-homophobic culture, writers should not be afraid to create these kinds of characters. While many gay and lesbian scholars have pointed to the dangers of positing gay people as "just like" straights, I want to suggest that there is a way in which this is true. Much of the time, this assertion is made about gay characters with impossibly ideal lives: a new twenty-first century version of the Cleavers. Equitable representations would depict gay people in as wide a variety of relationships as straight people, including unhealthy and dysfunctional ones. They would also include not only demographic and political diversity, but a sense of how these subject positions impact each other. Most of all, equitable representations are those created with the goal not of pleasing straight people but of drawing resonance and recognition from gay audiences. After twenty plus years of attention to the growing visibility of gay characters, it is time for creators to pay attention to the increasing, and increasingly vocal population of openly gay consumers of popular texts.

In this project, I have focused on representations of gay men in mainstream television, film, and drama, arguing that the problem with such representations is way in which they erase straight privilege and cater to the pleasures and comfort of straight audiences. While my project has dealt primarily with the intersection of homosexuality with gender and race, further work could be done ways in which representations of lesbianism work to shore up straight male privilege in ways that are both similar to and different from the ways that I discuss. Also, while my discussion of race centers on portrayals of gay African-Americans, the growth of racially diverse gay characters in popular texts should inspire more diverse examinations of portrayals of ways in which gayness intersects with race. I also think explorations of relationships between gay and straight men could be directed outside the scope of fictional texts towards the fields of politics, sports, and popular media. Many possibilities surrounding this topic remain unexplored.

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