Introduction

There's Something Queer Here
For my June 1st guys, Van Cagle and Richard Dyer, who were never far from my thoughts as I wrote
simann, Gordon Thomas, and Ann Klefstad offered their enthusiasm and helpful advice during those hectic months before production.

Finally, two special people endured long phone calls and face-to-face conversations about everything-in-the-world while I was attempting to live my life and write a book at the same time: Joan Rosales, the best Scorpio friend a Capricorn could have; and Rob Jacobs, the Lorelei to my Dorothy.

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What Makes Queerness Most?

Taken together, the sections of this book suggest that the queerness of mass culture develops in three areas: (1) influences during the production of texts; (2) historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers; and (3) adopting reception positions that can be considered "queer" in some way, regardless of a person's declared sexual and gender allegiances. Of course, floating around in culture is the text itself, which might be seen as a fourth distinct source of queerness. But unless the text is about queer, it seems to me the queerness of most mass culture texts is less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception. This does not mean the queerness one attributes to mass culture texts is any less real than the straightness others would claim for these same texts. As with the constructing of sexual identities, constructing the sexualities of texts results in some "real thing."

Having said this, however, I realize that at a number of points in the book I use language suggesting that the queerness I am discussing is incontrovertibly in the text, and that only heteronormative/homophobic cultural training prevents everyone from acknowledging this queerness. Perhaps this is because part of my purpose in writing this book is to speed the process of removing mass culture queerness from the shadowy realm of connotation to which much of it had been relegated. Notorious for its ability to suggest things without saying them for certain, connotation has been the representational and interpretive closet of mass culture queerness for far too long. Since it has become what D. A. Miller calls the "dominating signifying practice of homophobia," the concept of connotation allows straight culture to
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use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it.

As with any concept of "the closet," however, while the regime of connotation (to adapt Miller) "has the advantage of constructing an essentially insubstantial [queerness], it has the corresponding inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place." Given this, it often seemed that the most dramatic and effective way to overturn cultural and critical conventions that construct queerness as connotation was to argue that what had been (or could be) seen as "just reading (queerness) into things" was actually revealing what was there in the text. In conjunction with most of these statements about queerness-in-the-text, however, I raise and name various "ghosts" in mass culture production and reception that could lay claim to actually articulating the queerness "in" texts. As long as the analysis of mass culture remains dependent primarily upon texts, with their unstable representational codes, as the alpha and the omega of proof of queerness, the queerness of and in mass culture will remain "essentially insubstantial," as it will remain in the twilight zone of connotation.

"Uncloseted" or brought forward by equal attention to producers and readers, however, the queerness in and of mass culture might be used to challenge the politics of denotation and connotation as it is traditionally deployed in discussing texts and representation. In this way the closet of connotation could be dismantled, rejected for the oppressive practice it is. After all, the queerness I point out in mass culture representation and reading in this book is only "connotative," and therefore deniable or "insubstantial" as long as we keep thinking within conventional heterocentrist paradigms, which always already have decided that expressions of queerness are sub-textual, sub-cultural, alternative readings, or pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there—after all, mass culture texts are made for the "average" (straight, white, middle-class, usually male) person, aren't they? I've got news for straight culture: your readings of texts are usually "alternative" ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture. The day someone can establish without a doubt that images and other representations of men and women getting married, with their children, or even having sex, undeniably depict "straightness," is the day someone can say no lesbian or gay has ever been married, had children from heterosexual intercourse, or had sex with someone of the other gender for any reason.

In analyzing mass culture queerness, I often found myself within complicated discursive spaces when I considered how cultural heterocentrism and homophobia of the kind suggested above influences our understanding of the text/representation, as well as our understanding of the producers and readers of mass culture. As a result, my discussions of reception, authorship, narrative, genre, and star images attempt both to describe how and where certain heterocentrist critical and theoretical approaches to mass culture work, and to suggest how and where the queerness of texts, producers, and readers might be discussed outside these heterocentrist and homophobic discursive frames.

I find Michael Warner's discussion of queer theory's greatest investment in the text interesting in this context, as it implies that the queerness of texts is pervasive and yet not obvious to heterocentrist straight:

Almost everything that would be called queer theory is about ways in which texts—either literature or mass culture or language—shape sexuality. Usually, the notion is that fantasy and other kinds of representation are inherently uncontrollable, queer by nature. This focus on messy representation allows queer theory, like non-academic queer activism, to be both anti-assimilationist and anti-separatist: you can't eliminate queerness, says queer theory, or screen it out. It's everywhere. There's no place to hide, hetero scum.

While he initially focuses upon the text and representation in his summary of "what makes queer theory most," Warner quickly branches out to suggest that fantasy and politics are equally important in discussing queerness. Unable to accurately describe queer theory only in terms of textual fetishism, Warner's comments here are a good example of how difficult it can be to attribute the queerness of mass culture to just one source or another. Then there are those moments of "multiple queerness," when a number of distinct, sometimes contradictory, queer aspects or approaches suggest themselves in the face of a mass culture event.

So while I try to be as clear and coherent as possible about discussing the sources of queerness in the material that follows, the complexity and volatility of mass culture production and reception-consumption often make any attempt to attribute queerness to one (or usually) producers, texts, or audiences seem false and limiting. For example, chapter 3 analyses narrative construction in order to establish its central argument—that sitcoms such as Laverne and Shirley
might be called "lesbian." Yet the discussions of audience pleasure and character development that are connected to the textual analyses here gradually move away from the text as the source of queerness to find other sites of queerness in reception and within specific lesbian cultural coding and reading practices. This section also suggests that the various types of queerness in these sitcoms can be understood with reference to a number of political agendas.

But this critical-theoretical-political "messiness" about coming to a bottom line about queerness and "what makes queerness most" is actually one of the strengths in this early period of queer identity, culture, and theory formation. Teresa de Lauretis's comments about recent work to "reconceptualize . . . homosocialities" could apply to current attempts to establish queerness as an identity, a politics, and a theory, as queer discourse often seems "fuzzily defined, under-coded, or discursively dependent on more established forms." \(^\text{22}\) If at the moment no particular definition or use of "queer" and "queerness" has gained wide currency, however, there have been a number of interesting and influential definitional propositions.

Queer Nation's use of the term most often sets up queerness as something different from gay, lesbian, and bisexual assimilationism. In this case, to identify as a queer means to be politically radical and "in-your-face": to paradoxically demand recognition by straight culture while at the same time rejecting this culture. \(^\text{19}\) Part of what is being rejected here are attempts to contain people through labeling, so "queer" is touted as an inclusive, but not exclusive, category, unlike "straight," "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual." But many commentators have pointed out the contradictions between Queer Nation's specific political stance and its claims that "queer," as they use it, is an inclusive category. Miguel Gutierrez, for one, sees race and class issues limiting the inclusiveness of Queer Nation's queerness: "There are people who cannot afford to be nonassimilationist; they are fighting just to eat and live." \(^\text{17}\)

Among academic theorists, Teresa de Lauretis, in a note to her introduction for the "Queer Theory" issue of differences, says that her "queer" has "no relation to the Queer Nation group." What de Lauretis's "queer" does appear to represent is a way of rethinking gay and lesbian identities and cultures based on the speculative premise that homosociality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or by homology. In other words, it is no longer to be seen either as merely transgressive or deviant risk-taken a proper, natural sexuality . . . according to the older pathological model, or as just another, optional "life-style," according to the model of contemporary North American pluralism. . . . Thus, rather than marking the limits of the social space by designating a place at the edge of culture, gay sexuality in its specific female and male cultural (or subcultural) forms acts as an agency of social process whose mode of functioning is both interactive and yet resistant, both participatory yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference.\(^\text{20}\)

Where de Lauretis retains the categories "gay" and "lesbian" and some notion of gender division as parts of her discussion of what "queerness" is (or might be), Judith Butler and Sue-Ellen Case have argued that queerness is something that is ultimately beyond genders—it is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homos versus hetero paradigm usually articulated as an extension of this gender binary.

Since working with(in) queerness is only a few years old in activism and in academia, however, this seems more a time for questions and proposals than hard-and-fast defining statements. After all, in any of its uses so far, queerness has been set up to challenge and break apart conventional categories, not to become one itself. De Lauretis precisely describes the elusive quality of queerness I want to suggest in my readings of mass culture, when she describes it as "both interactive yet resistant, both participatory yet distinct." \(^\text{19}\) And while the notion of queer and queerness I use in this book borrows Queer Nation's goal of inclusivity, it does not limit queer expression to a certain political agenda. Any "queerer than thou" attitude, based on politics, style, sexual behavior, or any other quality, can only make queerness become something other than an open and flexible space. Queerness, in the way this book uses it, is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, none-, or anti-straight. So, as far as cultural production and reception are concerned, a conservative gay white male's response to Mel Gibson's star image is as queer as one of Sadie Benning's punkish "baby-dyke" videos.

While this broad understanding may seem blandly democratic, I ultimately use it to question the cultural demarcations between the queer and the straight (made by both queers and straights) by pointing out the queerness of and in straights and straight cultures, as well as that of individuals and groups who have been told they inhabit the
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boundaries between the binaries of gender and sexuality: transsexuals, asexuals, transvestites, and other binary outliers. Therefore, when I use the terms "queer" or "queerness" as adjectives or nouns, I do so to suggest a range of nonstraight expression in, or in response to, mass culture. This range includes specifically gay, lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but it also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) nonstraight positions.

This being the case, I like those uses of "queer" that make it more than just an umbrella term in the ways that "homosexual" and "gay" have been used to mean lesbian or gay or bisexual, because queerness can also be about the intersecting or combining of more than one specific form of nonstraight sexuality. For example, when a text such as Gentleman Pedler Blonds accumulates lesbian, gay, and bisexual responses, sometimes in relation to the same spectator, we have a queer text and queer reader, rather than a specifically lesbian or gay or bisexual text and reader. Queer would also describe the image of Katharine Hepburn dressed as a young man in Sylvia Scarlett, as it evokes complex, often unrecognizable, erotic responses from spectators who claim all sorts of real-life sexual identities.

But whereas I would call certain straight and gay male pleasures in The Mary Tyler Moore Show "queer," I would still use the term "lesbian" to describe the text's basic narrative construction and the pleasures dykes might take in the show. In working out ideas about queerness in mass culture, I often found it necessary to discuss the queerness of mass culture texts, producers, and readers with reference to particular nonstraight positions. This being the case, rhetorical shifts between queer/queerness and lesbian/lesbianism (or gay/gayness, bisexual/bisexuality) in this book are less signs of contradiction than they are attempts to mediate between the impulse to deconstruct established sexual and gender categories and the feeling that these categories need to be considered because they represent important cultural and political positions.

Working out a rhetorical strategy that clearly and consistently mediates between using established sexual identity labels and using "queer" has been difficult, however, particularly when I discuss texts and reader responses simultaneously. To refer to the example above, it is accurate to say that only self-identified dykes can have "lesbian" pleasures in the lesbian narrative of a program like The Mary Tyler Moore Show? If so, then would "queer" be used to describe the responses of nonlesbians to the show, so that gay men could be said to take queer pleasures in the lesbian narratives of The Mary Tyler Moore Show? But couldn't nonlesbians be taking specifically lesbian pleasures in the program's narratives? Might we go on to say that The Mary Tyler Moore Show's narratives encourage a specifically lesbian positioning vis-à-vis the text for all viewers?

Considering my definition and uses of "queer," I could find no easy solution to this rhetorical dilemma, as questions like the ones above are related to questions of labeling, essentialism, and sexual identity, as well to the political uses of these ideas. At this point, I find myself working with sexual identity terms in the service of not-quite-compatible goals. I want to construct "queer" as something other than "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual," but I can't say that "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual" aren't also "queer." I would like to maintain the integrity of "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" as concepts that have specific historical, cultural, and personal meanings, but I would also like "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" culture, history, theory, and politics to have some bearing on the articulation of queerness. On the other hand, it seems important not to have "queer" and "queerness" become the type of umbrella terms that implicitly position "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" erotics, cultures, and politics as mere subsets of something larger, and seemingly more complex, progressive, or politically efficacious concept. This has already happened to lesbians in relation to notions of "women," "feminism," "homosexuality," and "gayness.

Alisa Solomon's questions—"Can queer politics be forged without a gay or lesbian identity? And what would that be like?"—reflect a historical period during which many of us feel the need to continue referring to those established sexual and gender categories we've lived and worked under for so long, while simultaneously attempting to understand, and to articulate, the ways in which these categories don't quite represent our attitudes.11 It is the queer in me that empowers," says Carol A. Queen, "—that lets me see those lines and burn to cross them.12 This book was written from within this type of transitional cultural and theoretical space, as it recognizes gender and sexual "lines" while suggesting ways to question our understanding of how those lines function in mass culture production and reception. Ultimately, queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories. In order to maintain some level of coherence and consistency in my use of sexual identity labels in this work, however, I have adopted certain rhetorical compromises. While I never expected these compromises to answer every sticky theoretical or political question surrounding my
uses of "queer," "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" in relation to mass culture, at least these rhetorical decisions allowed me to consider these questions with some degree of complexity.

I decided to employ "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" when discussing texts or textual elements that work within monogender or non-straight hieogender dynamics (such as the lesbian sitcom narrative structure of Laverne and Shirley). "Queer" texts/textual elements, then, are those discussed with reference to a range or a network of nonstraight ideas. The queerness in these cases might combine the lesbian, the gay, and the bisexual, or it might be a textual queerness not accurately described even by a combination of these labels—such as the range of queerness in Sylvia Scarlett. As far as mass culture producers and readers-consumers are concerned, "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" are reserved in this book to describe the work, positions, pleasures, and readings of self-identified lesbians, gays, and bisexuals as they relate to sexually parallel areas in textual production or reception. So, I would call a gay's erotic response to the central male pair in Rope "gay," but I would not use "gay" to describe this same person's erotic response to the lesbian porn film Clips. This I would call "queer" (or perhaps even "straight," depending on the nature of the response). Therefore, "queer" is used to describe the nonstraight work, positions, pleasures, and readings of people who either don't share the same "sexual orientation" as that articulated in the texts they are producing or responding to (the gay man who takes queer pleasure in a lesbian sitcom narrative, for example), or who don't define themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual (or straight, for that matter). Finally, "queer" is occasionally used as an umbrella term, à la "homosexual," when I want to make a collective point about lesbians, and/or gays, and/or bisexuals, and/or queers (whether self-identified queers or queer-positioned nonqueers).

Given all of this, the queerness of and in this book is not something that is always distinctly different from "just" gayness, or lesbianism, or bisexuality—although it can be, as in cases of straight queerness, and of other forms of queerness that might not be contained within existing categories or have reference to only one established category. If this approach isn't always rigorous and precise about defining and theorizing separate "new" areas in mass culture production, reception, and textual analysis that are nonstraight as well as nonlesbian/ nongay/nonbisexual, I would hope the book's inclusive approach finally suggests that new queer spaces open up (or are revealed) whenever someone moves away from using only one specific sexual identity category—gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight—to understand and to describe mass culture, and recognizes that texts and people's responses to them are more sexually transmutable than any one category could signify—excepting, perhaps, that of "queer."