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# Introduction

I became a political animal in order to have a good time. . . .  
Feminism struck me as a good time, and it was. Back then, it still  
frightened the horses; it made most men foam at the mouth, and it  
got the best women horny.

—Bertha Harris

Once an sobriquet for eccentrics and a slur for sexual deviants, *queer* became, in the 1990s, a diacritical term for a wide-ranging political movement and nuanced scholarly critique of normative regimes, phobic policies, and structural inequalities. Queer theory and activism dramatized, often in a spectacularly theatrical fashion, the instabilities and incoherencies inherent in the purportedly stable alignment of biological sex, gender, and sexual orientation. An aggressive, confrontational, and media-savvy mode of engagement, *queer* stood for dissent against the oppressive mechanisms of normativity and normalization. Very quickly, however, *queer* came to be defined in opposition to the identity politics of earlier waves of sex and gender activism. This strategy of tactical supersession had the effect of obscuring what was vital and still viable about the ideology and practices of both second-wave feminism and the gay and lesbian liberation movement. This methodological maneuver prompted certain foundational figures, including Teresa de Lauretis—who is credited with coining the term *queer theory*—to abandon the neologism on the grounds that it had “become a conceptually vacuous creature” having more to do with marketing and branding than social critique and political experimentation.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, *queer* has continued to become increasingly disconnected from its theoretical potential and political promise. Its broad-based critique of an array of social exclusions has devolved into an assimilationist-oriented equal rights agenda advanced by members of an increasingly conservative mainstream whose quest for enfranchisement through liberal

reforms—such as marriage and military service—allies them more closely with heterosexuals from the “family values” faction of the Far Right than with gay and lesbian activists forged in the crucible of the New Left. Years of relentless attacks on identity politics have tended to foreclose rather than enable debates about institutionalized forms of oppression and economic disparities shaped by the material realities of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. This has resulted in the alienation of feminists, gays and lesbians of color, transgender activists, and other minority subjects from the movement, and it has given rise to what Jasbir Puar describes as the “unexpected flowering of new normativities in these queer times.”<sup>2</sup> Commodified by the marketing and media outlets it courted decades ago, *queer* has come to signal an ever-narrowing sense of sexual identity and a depoliticized form of consumer citizenship that is complicit with rather than critical of sexual neoliberalism, or what I call homoliberalism. Homoliberalism names the quest for acceptance, legitimacy, and formal equality through a pragmatic program animated by individual economic interests, a privatized sexual politics, and a constricted notion of national-public life. A ruse of parity and inclusion, homoliberalism allows for LGBT representation without a significant or meaningful redistribution of material and cultural resources or a transformation in the structures of power.

The issue of what, if anything, remains “critically queer” about contemporary sex and gender studies, has been the subject of much debate in progressive circles in recent years.<sup>3</sup> In 2005, David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz charged sixteen scholars with the task of assessing *What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?* in a special double issue of *Social Text*. The editors called for a reassessment of “the political utility of the term queer” not only in light of the mainstreaming of the LGBT movement but also with respect to global crises that have reconfigured historical, economic, and cultural alliances among political constituencies, remapping the geopolitical terrain through armed conflict, cellular networks of terrorism, natural disasters, and the diasporic populations these phenomena produce. Two years later Janet Halley and Andrew Parker served as guest editors for a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* titled *After Sex?* in which they asked contributors to discuss what constitutes queer theory other than an abiding interest in sexuality. In 2009, Heather Love hosted a conference at the University of Pennsylvania entitled “Rethinking Sex,” which featured over thirty scholars debating the past, present, and future of movements for sexual freedom.<sup>4</sup>

The general consensus of these collections and convocations, assembling queer theorists old and new, is that we must pay greater attention to the imbrication of sexual politics with other historical forces, political dynamics, and spheres of social engagement. This was echoed in another forum on recent trends in sex and gender studies, a 2006 roundtable on the topic of queer temporalities. Here Carolyn Dinshaw suggested that “*queer* history” should acknowledge “sex . . . as heterogeneous and indeterminate, even as it recognizes and pursues sex’s irreducible interrelatedness with other cultural phenomena,” including the bodily sense of touch.<sup>5</sup> This position is affirmed by Ann Pellegrini, who writes, “[A]ffective relations—painful and pleasurable, enervating and energizing—are part of the process of forging alternative histories, alternative values, queer communities.”<sup>6</sup>

Indicative of the “affective turn” in sex and gender studies (and in the humanities and social sciences more broadly), these critics have shifted the conceptual rubrics of scholarly inquiry away from epistemology (from the alleged truth of sexuality and how we can or cannot know it) and toward a consideration of phenomenology and feeling (of what motivates politics and performance).<sup>7</sup> The turn toward affect promises a better way of talking about the affiliations and identifications of minority subjects (better than discourses of identity and postidentity politics), and it foregrounds the emotional stakes of our scholarly projects, critical methodologies, and modes of knowledge production. This conceptual maneuver enables us to redirect our focus from locating gays, lesbians, and queers *in* previous eras (and in tracing the [in]stabilities of sexual taxonomies over time) to exploring the types of relations *with* historical figures that we hope to cultivate. Performance—which identifies, enacts, and disrupts sexual difference, not in terms of ontology or identity but through the more nuanced avenue of feelings—serves as a fertile site for exploring the affective dynamics and temporal logics that motivate sexual minorities, aligning them into constituencies and fostering networks of relationality across space and time.

While the affective turn in sex and gender studies promises new paradigms and new opportunities for the reappropriation of *queer*, it has not presented “the discursive occasion for a powerful and compelling fantasy of historical reparation” that Judith Butler cautioned, back in 1993, was necessary in order for queer to remain a viable category of critical analysis and a source of progressive political activism.<sup>8</sup> Far from helping *queer* “overcome its constitutive history of injury,” the affective turn has had the effect of reiterating and reinscribing it.<sup>9</sup> This is because much of the recent

scholarship on queer affects privileges bad feelings, emotions that make us feel terrible but can be politically productive as catalysts for social change (e.g., shame, loss, mourning, and melancholia), or “ugly feelings,” negative affects of a minor register that produce ambivalent situations of suspended, obstructed, or thwarted agency (e.g., boredom, anxiety, paranoia, irritation, and envy).<sup>10</sup> *Acts of Gaiety* offers a different point of departure. It takes as its subject good feelings, positive affects that involve pleasurable sensations and foster jubilant practices of life, art, and activism. Central to my thesis, however, is the notion that affective binaries fail to adequately capture or categorize the emotional dynamics of sexual politics and that trafficking in this dichotomous logic contributes, if not directly to the rise of homoliberalism, then certainly to a sense of amnesia about LGBT history that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to combat the mainstreaming of the movement.

What is interesting to me about the affective turn in sex and gender studies is how closely the reterritorialized queer agendas it has occasioned resemble the “passionate politics” of second-wave feminism and the gay and lesbian liberation movement.<sup>11</sup> From the Radicalesbians’ “The Woman-Identified Woman,” which defines *lesbian* as “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion,” to Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic,” which promotes a euphoric mode of creation that transcends the essentialism of biological reproduction but remains firmly embedded in the corporeal, we see forceful and nuanced articulations of lesbian identifications as what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling.”<sup>12</sup> Distinct from ideology or worldview, structures of feeling refers to “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt . . . specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought,” Williams tells us, “but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity.”<sup>13</sup> Integral to the vision of second-wave feminism and gay liberation was the desire to revolutionize sexual interactions and social relationships by developing new forms of intimacy that were sensual, egalitarian, and nonmonogamous; by forging kinship arrangements that were free of sexist attitudes, gender binaries, and racist biases; and by eradicating the institutions and ordinances that perpetuate oppressive hierarchies. Groups such as WITCH, Dyketactics, the Furies, GLF, Third World Gay Liberation, and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) sought to create a new world order that would bring about the affective, economic, and political liberation of all people.

Much of what transpired during this volatile time was ephemeral and/or

undocumented, often by choice as the recording, preserving, and marketing of movement activities was seen by many political radicals as bourgeois. Most countercultural groups not only lacked the resources to archive their doings, but they feared, with good reason, that they were being surveilled by the government. As a result, they tended to destroy, as opposed to conserve, their histories. This was true certainly in lesbian feminist circles.<sup>14</sup> It is no wonder that so much of our LGBT past is lost to cultural memory or that it would be so easy for queer theorists and third-wave feminists to feel that they were creating new forms, methods, and strategies of political engagement when, in fact, these tactics had been in circulation for quite some time. The affective turn in critical theory makes me want to return to earlier waves of LGBT activism in order to identify the felt dimensions and missed opportunities of our unrealized past.

Intended as an antidote to both the sanguine sentimentality of homo-liberalism and the enervating saturninity of queer theory, *Acts of Gaiety* explores the twinned and mutually informing histories of gayness as politics and gayness as *bon vivance*. This affective history of gaiety underscores the centrality of liveliness to LGBT cultures, and it shows us the folly of sober and straightlaced struggles for “full and equal rights” that sentimentalize homonormativity as a mode of political equality, sexual liberation, and domestic bliss. As other struggles for social justice make painfully clear, the best that this pragmatic approach can hope to achieve is a compromised form of citizenship. Affective histories involve ways of knowing and showing that are lived in and through moments of acute corporeal sensation. The sensate body serves as the vehicle and method for this brand of embodied and visceral consciousness. “[F]or gay people,” writes Joan Nestle in *A Restricted Country*, “history is a place where the body carries its own story.”<sup>15</sup>

Affective histories supplement our reliance on evidence and discernible fact with the sensations, impressions, and emotional connections that the remains of history can produce. As forms of knowledge production, they are less invested in recuperating the past than they are in encountering it as always already present in traces, signs, gestures, and actions. Narrating the past in a subjunctive and performative mode rather than an indicative mode, affective histories are rhizomatic rather than filiative, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s schema, which is to say they are heterogeneous, nonhierarchical, and nonreproductive in their logic.<sup>16</sup> Like laughter, they are contagious, corrosive, curative, and always already open to multiple avenues of inquiry and possibilities for articulating the past, present, and

future.<sup>17</sup> *Acts of Gaiety* moves us to confront on an emotional, physical, and intellectual register what has been unrepresented, underrepresented, and misrepresented by traditional modes of inquiry and canonical accounts of our queer past. Galvanized by a gleeful historical impulse and the desire to advance a more exuberantly progressive political program, this book reclaims gaiety as an important but neglected political affect that if revalued might revive and reorient LGBT art and activism.

## Gay Play

Gaiety plays an integral part in the establishment and maintenance of LGBT public cultures. Sexual minorities can boast of a rich performance history of entertaining audiences (both straight and gay) in bars, comedy clubs, and drag shows, but historically we have been most skilled in the art of carefully crafting personas that enable us to survive the drama of compulsory heteronormativity. “All of us who are queer can loosely be described as solo performers,” observes David Román, “insofar as we have had to fashion an identity around our gender and sexuality, drag being only one manifestation of this process.”<sup>18</sup> Homosexuals learn to pass as straight to avoid insult, injury, and persecution, often before we are old enough to be conscious of what we are doing or why. Unable to express deviant desires publicly, many sexual minorities seek solace in the arts. The theater has long been a haven for queers. It is a site of yearning and fantasy, a liminal world where almost anything is possible. Desire, including same-sex eroticism, serves as a driving force in the theater, motivating characters and audiences alike. Unconventional liaisons, aberrant behaviors, lax morals, and powerful emotions are the keystones of dramaturgy. Trafficking in magic and metamorphosis, glitter and glamour, which is to say in the possibility of transformation, the theater provides both a respite and a resource for society’s maligned and marginalized. Because of the crowd it attracts and the affective power it wields, playhouses are prime targets for censorship. Seen as a danger, or, like prostitution, a necessary evil, theater is often regulated and relegated to the physical margins of society.<sup>19</sup> Located in entertainment zones, red light districts, and bohemian enclaves where hedonism is actively encouraged, the theater is a veritable gateway into gaiety, carnal pleasures, and clandestine pursuits.

Theater is the affect machine par excellence; its most basic function is to make us feel. Whether through realist dramas, which obscure their normalizing force with claims to objectively reflect the world as it is, or through

experimental forms that actively challenge received truths and thwart the normalizing function of catharsis, the theater is an engine of emotions. Performance mobilizes and marshals affects, sentiments, and sensations, giving meaning and coherence to our perceptions. In its most utopian incarnation, suggests Jill Dolan, the theater “provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations” of “what a better world might feel like.”<sup>20</sup> From the halls of academia to the streets of our cities, performance has become, in recent years, the vehicle through which our concerns about affect, embodiment, identity, and sexuality are expressed, analyzed, challenged, and refashioned. Paying attention to performance, understood as the repetition of behaviors that instantiate and concretize our sense of “self” and “other,” allows us to examine the simultaneous and coconstitutive frames of expression, identification, and representation that structure our possibilities for agency, sexual subjectivity, and citizenship. When we celebrate artists such as Hanifah Walidah or D.R.E.D., whose dramatized personae challenge hegemonic structures of feelings that silence and circumscribe lesbians and people of color, or when we call to task religious fanatics, such as Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann, who attempt to bar sexual minorities from the rites and rituals of civic participation, we concern ourselves with how bodies matter, with how they do what they do and feel what they feel, using the conceptual paradigms of performance and performativity.

Conscious of performance’s role in ritual efficacy, and seeking to capitalize on ritual’s role in engendering identities, Butler defines gender as a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts, within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being.”<sup>21</sup> Performance provides the occasion and opportunity to trouble gender—not to mention race, class, and ethnicity—by enabling individuals and groups to “restyle” their bodies in a variety of different contexts, conditions, and environments. Butler’s articulation of gender performativity underscores how public manifestations produce private, interior identities and feelings of belonging through participation in social rites that mark one as a member of privileged or stigmatized populations. Gender performances involve complex, and often contradictory, enactments of compulsory and elective behaviors, gestures, and attributes whose truths are performatively produced through one’s fidelity to prescribed social and cultural scripts. Whether on the stage or in the practice of everyday life, the successful performance of one’s gender benefits the actor in question



through the bestowal of recognition and rewards. Infelicitous performances, on the other hand, risk punishment and prohibition, including bodily harm and death, as the rape and murder of Brandon Teena make painfully clear. Performances that blur the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate, normal and abnormal, justice and injustice, provide a forum in which we can imagine, if not enact, alternative structures of feeling and alternative ways of being in the world.

While the theater has sheltered many homosexuals and nurtured generations of gay artists, Robin Bernstein reminds us, it has also perpetuated gross stereotypes and played a significant role in reinforcing homophobic, sexist, racist, and classist social hierarchies.<sup>22</sup> Plays by heterosexuals typically cast homosexuals as psychotic perverts, degenerates, and criminals, but so, too, do scripts by gay authors. Mart Crowley's landmark play *The Boys in the Band* (1968), hailed by many as the first commercially successful play to offer a sympathetic depiction of gay male sexuality, centers around a group of closeted and self-loathing upper-middle-class men who rent a hustler for their friend Harold's birthday party. Referred to only as Cowboy, this rough trade is treated as a piece of meat. Paid to be objectified, the hustler must suffer being openly mocked by the intellectually superior college graduates who contracted his services. One of the friends, Bernard, is an African American who endures "Uncle Tom" jokes by the nelliest of the group, Emory. Emory is punched in the mouth by Alan, a heterosexual friend of the host who cannot contain his disgust for effeminate men.

In *The Boys in the Band*, Crowley shows both the devastating effects of homophobia and the protagonists' indulgence in gaiety as a way to combat it. Pleasure is resistance for these queens. The men laugh and joke, drink and take drugs, sing and dance (the play calls for Michael to camp it up to Judy Garland's "Almost Like Being in Love" and for the entire group to reprise a popular Fire Island dance called "Heatwave"). These seemingly frivolous acts of gaiety are what keep these men alive. While the party ends with every one of the boys having been humiliated or abused, some to the extent that they want to kill themselves, they put on another record, mix another cocktail, and make it through another night. Unlike most plays about homosexuals prior to the gay liberation movement, these gay men are neither alone nor dead when the curtain falls. As Michael notes in the final scene, "It's not always the way it is in plays. Not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story!"<sup>23</sup>

The characters in *The Boys in the Band* may not be happy—they may not

even be able to imagine themselves as happy (“[S]how me a happy homosexual,” says Michael, “and I’ll show you a gay corpse”), but they manage, somehow, to be gay.<sup>24</sup> Gaiety, here and throughout this book, has less to do with the expression of an inner emotion than it does with the projection, or theatricalization, of a feeling that one can inhabit, and enact so fully, that it appears “as if” it were emanating from the core of one’s being. These acts of gaiety facilitate a respite from the drudgery of daily life, provide escape from untenable situations, and enable the construction of alternate realities governed by values and aspirations obverse to (and despised by) mainstream culture. At a time when contemporary sexual politics is complicit with what Sara Ahmed calls “the promise of happiness,” it becomes increasingly urgent to counter coercive and pragmatic forms of political optimism with, among other things, historical accounts of the conjunctions of riot and revelry in earlier epochs of the LGBT movement.<sup>25</sup> Acts of gaiety do not make the world go away; they make worlds, albeit illusory and fleeting ones. The Boys create for themselves a *mundus ludibundus*. They experience life through play, as play, in play.<sup>26</sup> *Mundus ludibundus* is a world governed by the ludic, a world of pleasure seeking and joke telling, a world of leisure pursuits and sexual conquests. Serving as what Susan Sontag, in “Notes on ‘Camp,’” calls a “gesture of self legitimization,” acts of gaiety involve an awareness and appreciation of illusion, a penchant for the play of surfaces, and an understanding of appearances as distinct from reality.<sup>27</sup> Through parody, satire, and physical comedy, *The Boys in the Band* transforms something as ugly as homophobia into a cynical joke just as the Lavender Menace’s zap creates a thing of beauty from an abject identity.

## Homo Ludens :: Lesbo Ludens

Lesbians and feminists are not typically associated with gaiety. Dykes, especially those of the 1960s and 1970s, are routinely caricatured as sexless, humorless killjoys who (thankfully) lost the Culture Wars to dildo-packing, deconstruction-spouting genderqueers. Stereotypes painting dykes as strident, frigid, and frumpy abound in both mainstream and queer subcultural accounts of history. The strategies for self-definition and self-promotion successfully employed by gay men to increase their visibility, political clout, and economic capital—including camp, kitsch, and drag—have not been particularly efficacious for lesbians, not even those in the performing arts.<sup>28</sup>

“When lesbians make it to off-Broadway,” notes butch icon Peggy Shaw, “it’s the boys who are doing it.”<sup>29</sup> Shaw is referring specifically to Charles Busch’s *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, one of the longest-running shows in New York theater history.<sup>30</sup> The question of whether lesbian sexuality and dyke modes of humor can be made intelligible on the stage of national politics has preoccupied artists and activists since the 1960s.

The theater world has done comparatively little to challenge stereotypes of women and lesbians, in part because there were (and are) so few out dykes working as playwrights, directors, actors, or designers. As Roberta Sklar told the audience at a recent conference at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) on dykes in the 1970s, “One thing you didn’t do if you wanted a career in professional theater, you didn’t come out. . . . [I]f you wanted to be a lesbian in the theater, you understood that it was ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.’”<sup>31</sup> Many lesbian playwrights working during the era, such as María Irene Fornés, did not write lesbian plays. Why would they given that there were so few places that would stage them? Although there were many off-off-Broadway theaters where gay men could produce their work, there was no lesbian equivalent to Caffè Cino or the Play-house of the Ridiculous, not until 1976 when *Medusa’s Revenge*, a short-lived but influential performance space founded by two Cuban exiles, Ana María Simo and Magaly Alabau, opened on Bleecker Street.<sup>32</sup> Peggy Shaw called *Medusa’s Revenge* “the gayest place in town.”<sup>33</sup>

Lesbians like Jane Chambers, who did write openly gay plays and did enjoy a modicum of commercial success, tended to work in the realist vein, which meant that her protagonists ended up dead or doomed to an equally onerous fate. Unable to break through the glass proscenium, many dykes gravitated toward agitprop or avant-garde theater collectives. Sklar, for example, joined Muriel Miguel and Megan Terry at the Open Theater, but she left the troupe when it became apparent that the group had no interest in exploring issues related to women or lesbians. Partnering with Sondra Segal and Clare Coss, Sklar cofounded the Women’s Experimental Theatre (WET), which created work based on cultural feminist assumptions about innate biological differences between the sexes. Their best-known work, *The Daughter’s Cycle Trilogy* (1977–80), offers a revisionist history of Greek drama from the perspective of the female characters. This work presents the mother-daughter bond as a universal condition constitutive of women’s shared experience.

Many feminist collectives, such as It’s All Right to Be Woman Theatre

(IARTBW, 1970–76) and *At the Foot of the Mountain* (ATFOTM, 1975), generated content through consciousness-raising sessions. Their productions created a public forum for what had previously been seen as private issues that women suffered with in silence, including rape, abortion, and incest. These are serious topics that most women's theater troupes felt merited serious treatment, and understandably so. While performances by WET, IARTBW, and ATFOTM were not devoid of humor, they were certainly more solemn than they were silly. Not all feminists, however, took an earnest approach to women's history or to trauma. When Miguel left the Open Theater, she started a collective with her two (heterosexual) sisters, Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo. Drawing on their cultural heritage as members of the Kuna and Rappahannock nations, they called their troupe Spiderwoman Theater. *Spiderwoman* refers to the goddess of weaving, and the practice of story weaving is the foundation of the collective's feminist aesthetic. Their first performance was a comedy titled *Women in Violence* (1975), and it addressed violence against women and among women, as well as self-inflicted abuse. Eschewing the sober tone typically employed by other—predominantly white, middle-class—feminist collectives, these sisters used slapstick, burlesque, and bawdy humor to create powerful social satires. Spiderwoman Theater staged what many considered at the time to be politically incorrect comedies. While most feminist collectives burned out or disbanded within a few years, this troupe is still performing. Spiderwoman's gaiety is what keeps them going.

To engage in gaiety is to create a pleasurable and empowering experience out of an event or situation that is hateful or painful. Through parody, satire, and physical comedy, sexual minorities survive by replaying tragedy as farce. In so doing, they make manifest the pleasure of politics and the politics of pleasure. Before exploring further ludic forms of lesbian dramaturgy, I want to chart a longer affective history, as acts of gaiety have played an important role in LGBT world-making projects for a century, if not longer.

## A Gay Old Time

Helen Furr . . . did not find it gay living in the same place where she had always been living. She went to a place where some were cultivating something, voices and other things needing cultivating. She met Georgine Skeene who was cultivating her voice which some thought was quite a pleasant one. Helen Furr and Georgine

Skeene lived together then. . . . They were quite gay, they were quite regular, they were learning little things, gay little things, they were gay inside them the same amount they had been gay, they were gay the same length of time they had been gay every day.

—Gertrude Stein, “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene”

Although it was officially claimed as a revolutionary political identity in the late 1960s, *gay* has been used by people “in the life” to denote same-sex desire since at least the 1920s. A playfully ambiguous term, *gay* connotes good humor and indicates a positive and cheery disposition, but it also enjoys a long and storied association with passion, promiscuity, and perversion. As early as the seventeenth century, the word *gay* was associated with immorality, wantonness, lewdness, and licentious behavior. It was used to denote someone “addicted to pleasures and dissipations.”<sup>34</sup> The Gay Nineties refers to the 1890s, the fin-de-siècle epoch when hedonists flouted Victorian social norms. By this date, *gay man* was the term one used to refer to a rakish womanizer unencumbered by the shackles of marriage, and *gay woman* was slang for a prostitute, which one procured at a *gay house*, or brothel. An 1857 *Punch* cartoon by John Leech titled “The Great Social Evil” depicts a gaily attired working girl, Fanny, in the Haymarket at midnight, posed in an open door next to a poster of *La Traviata*, Verdi’s popular opera about a courtesan. She is accosted by a modestly dressed acquaintance, Bella, who, surprised at finding her friend in this situation, exclaims, “Ah! Fanny! How long have you been gay!”<sup>35</sup>

*Gay* began to take on overt political connotations in the mid-1940s, when, in the wake of World War II, sexual subcultures began to form in urban areas across the United States. Members of these enclaves began to view sexuality as an important rubric for understanding themselves as social subjects and minority citizens in relation to the dominant culture. In New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, they created underground networks where *gay* was used as an adjective to describe homosexual behavior, queer aesthetics, and same-sex events. A woman writing under the name Lisa Ben, an anagram for *lesbian*, wrote and self-published *Vice Versa: America’s Gayest Magazine* in 1947–48 while working as a secretary at a Hollywood movie studio. She also wrote and sang what she called “gay” parodies in queer bars in Southern California, including the Flamingo, which, as Ben recalls in an interview with historian Eric Marcus, “used to have Sunday afternoon tea dances there for just the gay kids. I would go there and have



As early as the seventeenth century, the word *gay* was associated with immorality, wantonness, lewdness, and licentious behavior. In this tableau, *gay* refers to a prostitute, which one sought at a *gay house*, or brothel. (John Leech, "The Great Social Evil," *Punch* 33 [January 10, 1857], 114.)

a gay old time."<sup>36</sup>

In the early 1950s, two black women, Ernestine "Tiny" Davis and her lover Ruby Lucas (née Renei Phelan), opened Tiny and Ruby's Gay Spot in Chicago. Davis, who was known as "the female Louis Armstrong," was one of the finest musicians of the swing era. She played trumpet for the all-woman band the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, an integrated ensemble that formed in 1937 and played for predominantly black audiences. Davis's fans included Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, and Armstrong himself, who reportedly offered her ten times her salary to tour with him. In a 1986 documentary film, Davis was asked why she did not leave the International Sweethearts of Rhythm to play for Satchmo. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, she said, "I loved them gals too much."<sup>37</sup> The Sweethearts broke up in 1949, after male soldiers returned from the war and made it increasingly difficult for women musicians to find work. "[W]e never got the credit we deserved,"

Davis said of the band. "But women have a hard time in anything. There's nothing you can do. Just keep on keeping on."

In 1949 Davis formed her own band, Tiny Davis and Her Hell Divers, separated from her husband and children, and moved to Chicago. Soon after, she met Lucas, a drummer, with whom she spent the next four decades. Asked to describe their relationship, Davis replied, "Ruby came over one day and never left. Hell, she stayed for forty-two years. Are we gay? Maybe we are. We have ourselves a time, I can say that."<sup>38</sup> For Davis, gay denotes her sexual orientation, but this has less to do with the naming of an identity than it does with indexing a pursuit of pleasure. Davis and Lucas were out when many black celebrities, such as playwright Lorraine Hansberry, were closeted. The influence of Tiny Davis and Ruby Lucas is undeniable in the Varied Voices of Black Women, a group of Bay Area poets and musicians comprised of Pat Parker, Linda Tillery, Mary Watkins, and Gwen Avery, whose US tour in the late 1970s helped many lesbians find their gay spot. Davis's legacy lives on in Ntozake Shange's choreopoems, which fuse music and sound, dance and movement, voice and the spoken word. It consonates with the eclectic, improvisational virtuosity of Sharon Bridgforth's theatrical jazz aesthetic, the subversive slam poetry of Staceyann Chin, and the haunting Haitian rhythms of Lenelle Möise's hip-hop-inflected performances.

Davis and Lucas risked a great deal in operating an openly gay club in the 1950s, as these operations were frequently the target of police raids, even if the owners paid for mob protection. Any man or woman who was not wearing at least three articles of clothing proper to their gender was taken to the precinct and booked. Groups of people assembled, even in a private home, without a balanced number of the opposite sex present were also subject to arrest. As David Carter reminds us in his book *Stonewall*, at the end of the 1960s homosexual sex was still illegal everywhere except Illinois. It was a crime punishable by castration in seven states. No laws—federal, state, or local—protected gay people from being denied jobs or housing. The fines levied against gays and lesbians for these transgressions were nothing compared to the financial hardships many homosexuals faced when they lost their jobs and/or spouses after their names and crimes were printed in the morning's newspapers. Tired of the public humiliation and social recrimination, and bolstered by burgeoning underground networks, homosexuals began to organize themselves as a political constituency. Unfortunately, as queers began to take themselves seriously as a political entity, some individuals and groups found the gay life of Tiny Davis, Ruby Lucas,

and Lisa Ben an obstacle to political enfranchisement.

In 1950 the Mattachine Society became one of the nation's first LGBT rights organizations, known as a homophile league—so named because newspapers would not print ads announcing gatherings or actions by people calling themselves homosexuals or gays, though publications such as the *Village Voice* and *Los Angeles Times* would print notices of homophile meetings and demonstrations. The Mattachine Society took its name from a secret society of masked revelers in medieval France that staged peasant revolts. Founder Harry Hay chose this moniker because he felt that “1950s gays were also a masked people, unknown and anonymous, who might become engaged in morale building and helping ourselves and others, through struggle to move toward total redress and change.”<sup>39</sup> Gaiety was central to the founding mission of the Mattachine Society, but this would soon change. Many of the original members were communists, and they based their organization on the cellular structure of the Communist Party, complete with levels of membership and oaths of secrecy. The Red Scare and homosexual baiting of the McCarthy era precipitated a coup in which Hay and the society's leftist leaders were cast as ideological extremists and ousted, along with their ludic politics.

The Mattachine Society's turn away from gaiety resulted in a lack of imagination and creativity, as evidenced by the group's increasingly narrow political vision. The new leaders promoted integration and liberal reform rather than radical social change, focusing their energies almost exclusively on antidiscrimination legislation and the decriminalization of homosexuality. As the founders' dream of social revolution gave way to the goal of assimilation, the group's communist rhetoric and flamboyant tactics came to be seen as a hindrance to the attainment of civil rights, as they confirmed heterosexuals' fears and gave credence to stereotypical depictions of flaming faggots and angry dykes. The new focus would be on proving that same-sex desire was normal and that homosexuals were just like everyone else. By adopting a politics of respectability promoting the moral and material achievements of dignified, middle-class citizens, members hoped to demonstrate their normalcy and worthiness by distancing themselves from decadent and debauched characters like Hay.

It was the newly sober and conservative Mattachine Society that served as the model for the first lesbian rights organization, the Daughters of Bilitis, which was founded in 1955 by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon.<sup>40</sup> The group published a newsletter called *The Ladder*, which filled the void left by Lisa



Ben's *Vice Versa*.<sup>41</sup> As the name of the periodical suggests, the emphasis was on progress and uplift, not gaiety or good times. *The Ladder's* "very establishment in the midst of witch-hunts and police harassment," notes historian Lillian Faderman, "was an act of courage, since members always had to fear that they were under attack, not because of what they did, but merely because of who they were."<sup>42</sup> Due to the risks publication entailed, many of the contributors used pseudonyms, including playwright Lorraine Hansberry, who signed her letters to the editor with the initials "L.H.N."<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, a shroud of secrecy permeated the meetings. Flavia Rondo, a member of GLF and Radicalesbians, recalls attending her first and only DOB meeting in New York in the late 1960s. Only three women were in attendance, and no one uttered the word *lesbian*.<sup>44</sup>

Shaped by complex, and at times contradictory, motives, ideologies, and objectives, homophile leagues sought to redefine the meaning of homosexuality, by disarticulating it from sexual deviance and social pathology, and to forcefully assert the role of queers in the shaping of American culture. By voicing the initial call for LGBT civil rights, homophile organizations made important contributions to sexual politics and paved the way for subsequent waves of activism. But they also set dangerous precedents by crafting policies and endorsing practices that circumscribed the movement. Believing that homosexuals would gain equality only by assimilating into mainstream society, homophile leagues required members to look and act straight. They mandated conformity to strict rules governing dress codes, social behavior, and gender norms. The DOB, for example, refused membership to "predatory butches."<sup>45</sup> The desire for social acceptance led homophiles to police themselves as forcefully, if not more so, than agents of the dominant culture did.

There were plenty of queers in the late 1950s and 1960s who had absolutely no desire to blend in or become part of the status quo, including: Tiny Davis; the Beat poets; the Black Mountain artists; playmakers at Caffè Cino, La MaMa E.T.C., Judson Poets' Theatre, and Play-house of the Ridiculous; Andy Warhol's Factory entourage; Jack Smith; José Sarria; Sylvia Rivera; Valerie Solanas; and Jill Johnston, to name only a few. In contrast to homophiles who pleaded for acceptance, these gender benders and nonconforming sexual outlaws staged outlandish acts of gaiety that served as potent and immensely pleasurable critiques of heteronormativity. Homophile leagues took the opposite approach, abstaining from public displays of gaiety in lieu of earnest and serious appeals for accommodation. These early activist or-

ganizations renounced gayness and gaiety as a precondition for citizenship. In casting the ludic as antithetical to the struggle for civil rights, homophile leagues inhibited impulses and legislated pleasures. Because Mattachine and DOB were so invested in assimilation, many historians cite the Stonewall uprising rather than the founding of homophile organizations as the origin of the modern gay and lesbian liberation movement.

## Revelers, Rebels, and Rioters

Even the riots were a riot.

—Jerry Hoose, GLF

Police and patrons alike were surprised during a routine raid of a mafia-run bar in Greenwich Village in the wee hours of June 28, 1969, when some of the clientele resisted arrest. In a spontaneous gesture of civil disobedience, the clients at the Stonewall Inn—which included lesbians, street hustlers, transexuals, and drag queens, a number of them queers of color—fought back against the police. Refusing to provide identification and failing to go quietly and obediently to the station to be processed, they unleashed years of pent-up rage at the injustices they had endured by attacking law enforcement officials. People smashed glasses, broke bottles, and threw chairs at the officers. Outside the Stonewall Inn, a crowd began to form. When the police exited the bar to place detainees into squad cars, they found themselves outnumbered. Surrounded by several hundred demonstrators who assailed them with coins, beer cans, and bricks from a nearby construction yard, the officers retreated and barricaded themselves inside the bar. Uprooting a parking meter, some of the demonstrators smashed through the plate glass window. As protesters seized the police, the officers drew their guns and threatened to shoot. Someone set the bar on fire, and within seconds the room was engulfed in flames. Reinforcements arrived and tried to reestablish order. The Tactical Police Force, donning full riot regalia, attempted to disperse the crowd.

In one of the greatest acts of gaiety in LGBT history, a group of queens responded to this show of force by staging an impromptu chorus line. Locking arms and kicking up their heels, they sang, “We are the Stonewall girls. We wear our hair in curls. We don’t wear underwear. We show our pubic hair. We wear our dungarees above our nelly knees.” Unable to counter this

display of military might, homosexuals used the most effective weapon in their arsenal: gaiety. Satire and parody are disarming; they mock objects of reverence and authority, toppling them from their exalted position by rendering them absurd and ridiculous. Kicking and screaming, this chorus of queers' riotous laughter rendered the cops impotent if not pathetic. When disciplinary regimes go to such extremes—in this case tear gas and assault rifles—to show how obscene and revolting homosexuals are, often the only thing gays can do is show how ludicrous homophobia is.

The Stonewall uprising was a spontaneous but highly self-conscious performance event. Like all theatrical spectacles, acts of gaiety involve participants and observers. The spectators may be invited to join in the fun, as in the case of the Lavender Menace zap, or they may be the butt of the joke, as the police who raided the Stonewall Inn were. "For years I have heard people describe the event as angry and I suppose in a way it was," recalled the late playwright Doric Wilson.

But that was not the main emotion I remember experiencing that night. I could never seem to find the right words. While filming the "American Experience" documentary it suddenly came clear to me. The first reaction that night was shock and then awe that we were coming out of the "twilight" and actually standing up to authority—fighting back. And what followed was a giddy and joyous glee. And somehow we knew nothing would ever be quite the same again.<sup>46</sup>

The rioting and revelry continued for several days and led to the formation of the Gay Liberation Front in early July. A short-lived but enormously influential umbrella organization comprised of seasoned civil rights activists, radical feminists, socialists, anarchists, and peace activists, GLF's mission statement read:

We are a revolutionary group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished. We reject society's attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature.<sup>47</sup>

The Gay Liberation Front was less interested in attaining social acceptance for homosexuals than it was in challenging the gendered and racist foundations of patriarchal society. "Gay liberation is a struggle against sexism,"

wrote GLF member Allen Young, against the “belief or practice that the sex or sexual orientation of human beings gives to some the right to certain privileges, powers, or roles, while denying to others their full potential. . . . The definition of sexism, as defined by women’s liberation and gay liberation, presupposes a struggle against the main perpetrators of society—straight white men—and against the manifestations of sexism as they appear in all people.”<sup>48</sup>

Part of a rainbow of identity movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, GLF was the first political faction to take up the appellation “gay.” Martha Shelley, a former president of the DOB’s New York chapter and an active participant in the Student Homophile League (SHL), is credited with suggesting that the group add “Gay” to “Liberation Front,” which members wanted to use to signal their allegiance with anti-imperialist struggles in Vietnam and Algeria.<sup>49</sup> Playing off the Black Panther slogan “Black is Beautiful,” GLF proclaimed, “Gay is Good.”<sup>50</sup> Countering the pathological portrait of same-sex attraction as sick and sinful, shameful and secretive, *gay* affirms homoerotic desire as healthy and happy. Some have argued that the term was attractive to activists because “Gay is simple and easy to say and free from the usual stigmas,” which is to say that it employs “a language free from odium.”<sup>51</sup> This line of reasoning seeks to occlude the etymology and checkered past of the word *gay* and is contradicted by the militant and oppositional politics of GLF.

The Gay Liberation Front was not for people who just happened to be gay. As Martha Shelley notes, “Other organizations were for people who wanted to join the mainstream, who thought the only thing wrong with American society is that they excluded gays.” Members of GLF saw themselves as part of the counterculture, and they insisted on their difference from—not their similarity to—the rest of society. While members of the Mattachine Society wore suits and ties to demonstrations and DOB members donned dresses and heels to peacefully picket establishments, the Lavender Menace wore T-shirts and dungarees to guerrilla theater actions. These radicals staged aggressive, in-*yer-face* demonstrations to force public debates about homosexuality. Their media-savvy protest tactics pushed the gay agenda to the center stage of national politics.

While *gay* self-consciously connotes a positive affect, it also encodes a history of illicit and transgressive pleasure-seeking proclivities. The term acknowledges but seeks to transmute the mournful and melancholic aspects of a spoiled identity. As the antithesis of *straight*, *gay* carries with it a critique

of bourgeois notions of decorum and respectability. To be gay is to be care-free, to be uninhibited by moral constraints, and to exhibit a disregard for conventions. The inverse of sobriety and seriousness, *gay* is frolicsome and fun-loving. Indicative of a devil-may-care attitude, *gay* worries less about the future repercussions than it does about present pleasures. It transforms what is lifeless, plain, and dull into something that is vibrant, vivacious, and festive. Animated and alive, sparkling and spirited, *gay* suggests an orientation that is performative rather than static. Flashy and flamboyant, brilliant, and showy, *gay* can be as colorful as Gladys Bentley's Harlem cabaret act or as garish and gaudy as Ethyl Eichelberger's drag.

Playing as it does on and with the multiple registers of *gay*, the naming of GLF is itself an act of gaiety. To call oneself *gay* in 1969 was a defiant gesture and a bold expression of non-normative desires. More than a sexual identity, *gay* denoted a revolutionary attitude and a collective aspiration for a more just world. As Young wrote in *Out of the Closet: Voices of Gay Liberation* (1972), the groundbreaking anthology he edited with Radicalesbian Karla Jay, "Gay, in its most far-reaching sense, means not homosexual, but sexually free."<sup>52</sup> Gay and lesbian liberationists argued that heterosexuality and homosexuality are artificial categories propagated by a sexist society, not fixed or immutable essences. In a more enlightened world, these radicals reasoned, the need for such nomenclature would disappear. Insisting that sexuality was much more fluid than existing structures allowed, they fought to transform the repressive sexual norms of American culture. "[I]n a free society," Young insisted, "everyone will be gay."<sup>53</sup>

Given the degree to which gay history has been occluded by queer studies and given the degree to which *gay* has become attached to the name of certain conservative aspirations in the past two decades, with gay marriage and gays in the military dominating the gay agenda, it is easy to forget—especially for those too young to remember—that gay liberationists were vehemently opposed to such reformist measures. These activists were highly critical of the institution of matrimony and of the role US armed forces played in imperialist projects at home and abroad. The language of gay rights distorts the history of sexual politics in the twentieth century by disarticulating *gay* from its radical roots and cementing it to a series of neoliberal reforms, homonormative programs, and assimilationist aims. Members of GLF could not have imagined in 1969 that just a few decades later gays would consent, let alone volunteer, to fight an unjust war and that

they would do so under the banner of equality. Nor could they have envisioned that radicals who once decried marriage as the root of patriarchal and capitalist oppression would demand their right to indentured servitude and government regulation of their intimate relationships—and that they would do so using the tenets of the 1950s homophile movement.

If GLF “hadn’t exploded into existence,” writes Martha Shelley in an essay titled “Our Passion Shook the World,” “gays would still be pleading politely for acceptance, and the world would still be deaf to their pleas.”<sup>54</sup> These activists “were hot and rude, joyous and angry, utopian and opinionated. ‘Nuanced’ wasn’t part of our vocabulary,” recalls Shelley. “Question authority? We didn’t even recognize it!”<sup>55</sup> Emboldened by the feminist dictate that the personal is political, GLF activists transformed the process of coming out from a private act into a public event. They urged people to take part in the political performance of coming out and to stage it as an act of gaiety. *Come Out!* was the title of the group’s newsletter, first published in November 1969. The inaugural edition of the periodical reads:

COME-OUT, A NEWSPAPER FOR THE HOMOSEXUAL COMMUNITY, dedicates itself to the joy, the humor, and the dignity of the homosexual male and female. COME-OUT has COME OUT to fight for the freedom of the homosexual and to give voice to the rapidly growing militancy within our community, and to provide a public forum for the discussions and clarification of methods and actions necessary to end our oppression. COME-OUT has COME OUT indeed for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>56</sup>

Liberationists saw coming out not as a panacea but as a radical act of gaiety that countered homosexual shame with gay pride. The idea was to come out and play. Ludic rites such as the Christopher Street Liberation Day March (later renamed Gay Pride) that GLF organized to commemorate the first anniversary of the Stonewall uprising served as a ribald retort to a homophobic society (it was actually a demonstration not a float-filled procession sponsored by corporate conglomerates seeking to cash in on a niche market as it is today). Gay pageants, protests, and performances served as ambient environs in which deviant subjects could fend off some of the bad feelings associated with being gay in a straight world.

## From Gay Pride to Queer Shame

Chants of “Gay Power” became the battle cry for sexual liberation and coming out its paradigmatic expression. Pride has fueled the struggle for the decriminalization of homosexuality and the demand for legislation granting protection of civil liberties. It has been the impetus for the establishment of LGBT studies in universities and colleges, as well as the proliferation of gay art and cultural festivals, most of which take place during the month of June. Since 1969 the gay and lesbian movement has made incredible progress toward the goal of sexual liberation, resulting in unprecedented and, for many veteran activists, almost unimaginable political change. Despite the tremendous gains it has wrought, the concept of pride has engendered more than its fair share of discontent among sexual minorities, in part because its hard-won victories have not benefited all homosexuals equally. Reaping the greatest rewards are homoliberals, whose investment in normative social and economic structures leads them to reify rather than challenge the status quo. Seeking parity, equal access, and integration into the national fabric, homoliberals do little to problematize or expand the criteria for citizenship.

Over time the concept of pride has become disarticulated from gaiety. The desire for sexual minorities to see themselves accurately portrayed in the media and to control the means of their (self-)representation quickly turned into an imperative to put forward positive, and only positive, images of same-sex desire. This has led to the construction of constricted and confining scripts for virtually every aspect of homosexuality, from coming out to cruising, and to mandates that spokespeople for the movement be clean-cut, conventionally attractive, and respectable. In this way, pride has become complicit with social hierarchies of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and able-bodiedness in producing “proper” gay subjects at the expense of “improper” ones. Rather than offering an antidote to shame and self-loathing, the imperative of gay pride can compound these emotions by making queers feel that they are the source of their own unhappiness.

Along with the homoliberalization of sexual politics, the concept of pride has become increasingly commodified. A fatal attraction between advertisers and apolitical assimilationists has transformed the gay liberation movement into a gay free market economy. In the past forty years, the annual parade has become less a political act of gaiety and more a celebration of lifestyle and shopping habits. Whereas the Dyke March (first held in 1993 in conjunction with the March on Washington) refuses corporate sponsor-

ship, the Pride Commission actively solicits donations and subsidies from companies seeking brand integration with a lucrative niche market. As the parade devolved into a carnival of consumption, the concept of pride came to be seen as both limited and elitist. People began to wonder: what political affects had been occluded or ignored in our fervent promotion of pride, and to what extent had the imperative to be out and proud repressed discussion of more controversial, less dignified aspects of sexuality?

A three-day international conference featuring almost fifty panelists was held at the University of Michigan in 2003 “to confront the shame that lesbians, gay men, and ‘queers’ of all sorts still experience in society; to explore the transformative impulses that spring from such experiences of shame; and to ask what affirmative uses can be made of these residual experiences of shame now that not all gay people are condemned to live in shame.”<sup>57</sup> Events of various kinds commemorating gay shame have been staged across North America and Europe in subsequent years, including a series of events exploring political depression by a group of academics, activists, and artists associated with Feel Tank Chicago. On May Day, members of Feel Tank, clad in bathrobes and slippers, stand on street corners shaking Prozac bottles and holding signs that read “Depressed? It Might Be Political.” The collective explores the potential for bad feelings such as shame, fear, apathy, anxiety, hopelessness, numbness, despair, and ambivalence to constitute and be constituted as forms of political resistance. These actions are a sharp contrast to the celebratory, feel-good displays of community and camaraderie that typically punctuate the month of June.

Dissatisfaction with the rhetoric of pride can be traced to the sex wars of the 1980s. Self-described “pro-sex feminists,” many of whom were lesbians, reacted to the puritanical stance of antipornography feminists such as Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin by celebrating what are considered by many to be shameful sexual practices, including sadomasochism (S/M), bondage, and public sex. Susie Bright, Honey Lee Cottrell, Tee Corinne, Jewelle Gomez, Joan Nestle, and Pat Califia contributed to the inaugural issue of *On Our Backs: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian* (1984), the first feminist erotica magazine and the first to feature dyke porn by and for dyke audiences. The title of the publication is a satirical jab at *off our backs* (aka, *oob*), the longest-running feminist newspaper in the United States, which served as a platform for the antipornography position. Lesbian feminists began producing adult videos, unionizing strip clubs like the Lusty Lady in San Francisco, and reclaiming the art of burlesque. The desire to counter the



moralizing practices of antipornography activists prompted women in the 1980s to renew their commitment to gaiety.

The WOW Café, an off-off-Broadway performance space and social club, took root in New York's East Village in the midst of the sex wars and became a laboratory for the exploration of lesbian feminist gaiety. Opening just as Medusa's Revenge was closing shop, WOW Café produced some of the most audacious, sex-positive, feminist artists of the 1980s and 1990s, who titillated audiences with their hilarious and witty gender-bending productions.<sup>58</sup> Paradigmatic of the formal experimentation, political daring, and unbridled eroticism that inspired and sustains WOW to this day is the Split Britches collective, comprised of the working-class butch/femme dynamic duo of Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver and the immensely talented writer/performer Deb Margolin, who is heterosexual. Split Britches lampoons sexual norms, social conventions, and coming-out narratives in plays such as *Upwardly Mobile Home*, *Little Women: The Tragedy*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. One of the group's best-known productions is the Obie Award-winning *Belle Reprieve*, a parody of Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*, which they created in collaboration with Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw (aka, Precious Pearl) of Bloodlips, an anarchic drag troupe from London. Shaw and Bourne (who became radicalized though a cell of GLF) had worked together years earlier when both were members of the glam fab cabaret group Hot Peaches.

While on tour in Berlin in the late 1970s, Hot Peaches received a request from Spiderwoman, which was also performing there, asking to borrow some costumes, as the group's luggage had been lost in transit. When Weaver, who was part of the Spiderwoman collective, arrived to pick up the costumes, it was love at first sight for her and Shaw. Shaw left Peaches in hot pursuit of forbidden fruit. When she and Weaver returned to the States, they cohosted an international feminist theater festival in New York City. Seeking a permanent place for women's theater, the couple helped create the WOW Café, where Split Britches became a crowd favorite. It shared the stage with the likes of Alina Troyano, whose alter ego, Carmelita Tropicana, serves up Molotov cocktails of bons mots that give new meaning to *cuba libre*; Holly Hughes, an abstract painter-cum-performance artist who became notorious as one of the NEA Four; and the Five Lesbian Brothers, a collective of ballsy and brilliant women whose most recent collaboration serves as the concluding chapter in this study of gaiety.<sup>59</sup>

The Brothers banded together in 1989, one year before Queer Nation was formed in New York City by AIDS activists from ACT-UP. The AIDS

epidemic cut short the utopian moment of gay liberation and reinforced the perception of homosexuals as degenerate and diseased. A paranoid and melancholic response to the crisis seemed much more appropriate to a threat of this magnitude than the cheery optimism inherent in the rhetoric of gay pride. As the disease spread, and the government demonstrated little more than apathy for the cause, acts of gaiety gave way to gestures of grief and mourning. This is not to suggest that gaiety was absent from or inimical to queer politics. Activists continued to stage ludic forms of protest, including zap actions, but these tended toward dark play and macabre rituals as a way to explore the complex relationships between pleasure and pain, sex and death.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, however, an increasingly vocal contingent of artists and activists, spearheaded by folks like Andrew Sullivan, a writer for and later editor of the *New Republic*, and ACT-UP cofounder Larry Kramer, fueled the sex panic by arguing that homosexuals were (or should be) more invested in monogamy than in having casual intercourse. Sullivan's *Virtually Normal* called for the legal recognition and social normalization of gays and lesbians, particularly through marriage. Similarly, in Kramer's deeply affecting AIDS drama *The Normal Heart*, the protagonist Ned Weeks urges gay men to "fight for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimize promiscuity."<sup>61</sup> Although a number of queer theorists sought to counter these critiques by outlining "the trouble with normal," the more conservative voices prevailed in redirecting the queer agenda toward a pragmatic, integrationist program of homoliberalism.<sup>62</sup> This is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that two recent award-winning revivals of *The Normal Heart*, one off-Broadway (at the Public Theater in 2004) and one on Broadway (at the Golden Theater in 2011) did little to foment political outrage about the persistence of AIDS or its transformation into a global phenomenon but succeeded in generating considerable amounts of money and support for same-sex marriage referendums.

## Gaily Forward: Toward a Retro-Activist Future

For decades, queer theorists have prided themselves on being at the cutting edge of scholarship, and they have valorized the avant-garde in aesthetics, politics, and other forms of culture work. In retrospect, we can see how this posturing has contributed to a fetishization of evolution, advancement, and forward motion. In recent years, *queer* has become increasingly dis-

connected from both its critical potential and its radical aspirations. The term has come to denote a more narrowly defined sense of sexual identity, one that advances the economic interests of corporate conglomerates and the nation-state through the promotion of cultural hegemony and liberal norms of social inclusion. Today, *queer* and *nationality* no longer strike us paradoxical terms, antithetical propositions, or an ironic and parodic mode of dissent. What we thought thirty years ago was a fluid formula of antinormativity turned out to be, with a few modifications and misapplications, a recipe for the conservative and profoundly antidemocratic assimilationist project of homoliberalism.

There is no way of knowing what will be the most radical, innovative, or progressive *avant la lettre*, just as there is no way of predicting or orchestrating, with any degree of accuracy, the afterlife of sexual experiments. Oftentimes our best shot at thinking outside the box is not by privileging the vanguard but by enlisting those seemingly passé, obsolete, and useless formations deemed to be at the rear guard. *Acts of Gaiety* is organized around what many might consider a retrogressive repertoire of corporeal gestures and civic performances. My interest in seemingly outmoded acts of gaiety exemplifies what Lucas Hildebrand calls retroactivism, a form of political and affective regeneration that seeks to resuscitate the dissident dreams of the past. Valerie Solanas's man-hating manifesto, the antifamily rhetoric of WITCH protests, the separatist screeds of lesbian nationalists, and Hothead Paisan's matriarchal machinations appear to us today as "revolting," but not necessarily in the hilarious and politically offensive ways their creators originally intended. Why attempt to resurrect such cringe-worthy performances in order to reanimate a disavowed structure of feeling? The answer is that this mode of archivalism sheds light on how our construction of the past dictates political and performative possibilities in the present.

Plumbing neglected archives and seemingly antiquated practices, *Acts of Gaiety* places discarded and discredited histories of lesbian art and activism into meaningful and transformative relations with the present in order to make the conservative, hegemonic narratives of homoliberalism seem alien and unfamiliar and to elucidate different modalities for public and political life. Underwriting *Acts of Gaiety* is the notion that a Fabian strategy comprised of dilatory dyke tactics may be our best hope for countering the forces of homoliberalism. An obdurate, unyielding, and dogged attachment to outmoded ideals and aspirations is a cornerstone of lesbian feminism and of my critical methodology as well. I term this approach a degenerate

diacritics, by which I mean a mode of scholarly engagement that concerns sexual deviates and reverts to an earlier stage of culture, development, or evolution in order to put the past in “touch” with the present so as to re-imagine the future.<sup>63</sup> In suggesting that we alter course and proceed astern, I am in no way advocating a retreat from the public sphere or calling for a return to identity politics. As Heather Love has suggested, a stubborn insistence on “backward feelings” is a feature of even the most forward-reaching lesbian feminist cultural productions.<sup>64</sup> While my book promotes “feeling backward” as a way to reenter a prior historical moment and circumvent the seemingly relentless forward march of homoliberalism, it resists the melancholic urge to “dwell at length on the ‘dark side’” of queer life, as Love’s eloquent elegy to queer history does.<sup>65</sup>

In its affirmation of the role of pleasure, as well as pain, in shaping the way subjects come to understand themselves and remake the circumstances in which they find themselves, *Acts of Gaiety* is sympathetic with Elizabeth Freeman’s theory of temporal drag, a tantalizing neologism describing “the gravitational pull that ‘lesbian,’ and even more so ‘lesbian feminist,’ sometimes seems to exert on ‘queer.’”<sup>66</sup> Attention to the temporal drag of dyke aesthetics reminds us that *revolution* refers to a *new* movement instigated by an insurrection but also to a circuit that is *renewed* by a force turning back on itself. Emphasizing the dual meaning of this word acknowledges the nostalgic demands of a retroactive lesbian feminism by directing our focus to the lost possibilities and unfinished business of this still potent program for social justice.

I refer to the archives that I draw on as “acts of gaiety,” and each of the five chapters that follow offers an extended meditation on drama queens, jesters, guerrilla activists, and terrorists who challenge our presumptions about how much progress we have made since the lesbian and gay liberation movement began, in what directions, and at what costs. These case studies blend archival research, performance ethnographies, and close readings of texts and productions. Because the actors, objects, and events that concern me here have been so poorly documented, so systematically ignored, or so grossly misunderstood by both their peers and subsequent generations of scholars and activists, I have opted to dwell on individual acts of gaiety in specific moments of LGBT history, offering thick descriptions of a relatively small number of characters and events. This approach responds to the need for more nuanced and sustained interpretations of lesbian performance, art, and politics, and it addresses the dearth of theoretical formulations for in-

terpreting the cultural productions and critical legacies of a pivotal period in LGBT studies.

Chapter one, “‘Scummy’ Acts: Valerie Solanas’s Theater of the Ludicrous,” offers the first documentation of the previously undiscovered publication and production history of the most provocative and profoundly seditious lesbian dramaturge in the history of pre-Stonewall American performance. Better known as the attempted assassin of Andy Warhol than as a pioneering playwright, Solanas has been denied the recognition she deserves as the preeminent lesbian feminist dramatist of the sexual revolution. Her experimental comedies bear a striking resemblance to the work of gay male playwrights and performance artists of the burgeoning off-off-Broadway movement, but they are unique in their depiction of lesbian sexuality and nothing short of pioneering in their articulation of a feminist consciousness. Solanas’s militant tone and scabrous humor were so beyond the pale that her plays scandalized theater patricians, counterculture radicals, and pornographers alike.

My focus here is on Solanas’s landmark 1965 play *Up Your Ass*, an uproarious and electrifying parody of heterosexuality, gender norms, race relations, and the misogyny of queer countercultures. Gaiety functions as a structuring principle in the scummy world of queer street culture where the play is set. The multiethnic cast of *Up Your Ass*, which features a Hispanic butch dyke protagonist and black drag queen prostitutes, exposes the prerogatives and fantasies of white, middle-class liberals. When Solanas could not fight her way into the art world, she set about to make her own scene. Unable to find a home for her play, she began to create happenings, which she called “SCUMMY things.” I demonstrate here that she not only intended *SCUM Manifesto* as a “SCUMMY thing,” but she developed the “script” in and through performances around New York and San Francisco in 1967 and 1968. This perpetually homeless, hooker dyke self-produced, in obscure venues for a handful of people, lesbian feminist performances that for decades would be virtually unimaginable, even in the most forward-looking artistic circles.

It was in defense of Valerie Solanas, after she shot Warhol, that Ti-Grace Atkinson, president of the New York chapter of NOW, coined the term *radical feminism*. Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto* had a profound effect on Atkinson’s political theory and activism, including highly theatrical antimarriage protests she conducted with The Feminists. Chapter two, “Guerrilla Acts: Marriage Protests, 1969 and 2009,” juxtaposes zap actions protesting the

institution of matrimony by lesbian feminists with demonstrations staged by supporters of same-sex unions after the passage of California's Proposition 8. This pairing shows how zaps, true to their name, can either incite or eviscerate debate on a given topic. More important, it sheds light on the ways in which marriagists transformed the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, which took place just a few months after the Prop 8 vote, into a public enactment of forgetting, one that redefined gay liberation to make it consistent with a homoliberal agenda. My mission here is to reveal how LGBT historical memory is being politicized through antiludic public performances that produce amnesiac scenes of assimilation.

Chapter three, "Expatriate Acts: Jill Johnston's Joker Citizenship," looks at sapphic spectacles of anarchic civil disobedience staged by America's first shameless public lesbian. Best known for her book *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (1973), a collection of essays credited with sparking the separatist movement, Johnston is a progenitor of what I am calling joker citizenship, a mirthful and militantly erotic mode of insurrection and communion that recasts patriotism as a desire to reterritorialize the nation as a site of pleasure. Taking seriously Johnston's insistence that the revolution should be fun or we should forget it, I argue that her unique mode of political dissent makes manifest the performative force of the ludic in lesbian nationalism and theatricalizes a structure of feeling I term national gaiety. I am most interested in how gestures of joker citizenship create an occasion and opportunity for sexual agency and how they enable subaltern subjects to imagine new forms of public and political life that counter assimilationist forms of homonormative polity.

The spirit, if not the actual practice, of lesbian nationalism, persists in a variety of forms in a number of dyke subcultures and is a guiding force behind a genre of artistic production I call the lesbian comedy of terrors. A revenge fantasy featuring vigilante heroines, scenes of graphic violence, and dark humor, the lesbian comedy of terrors exploits for humorous effect the compulsory rites and rituals of hetero- and homonormativity. Although most radical lesbians decry the use of violence to combat violence, this does not stop them from dreaming about mutiny or dramatizing fictional scenarios of sedition. Chapter four, "Terrorist Acts: The Maladapted *Hothead Paisan*, a Lesbian Comedy of Terrors," looks at a paradigmatic example of this genre, Diane DiMassa's zine *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*, and a musical theater adaptation of this work by Riot Grrrl Animal Prufrock that was staged at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 2004. I show

that archaic structures of feeling and disavowed histories can serve as vital components of a radical agenda or, in the case of this musical, as unwitting conduits for homoliberalism. Contrasting two related but distinct enactments of lesbian gaiety, I challenge commonplace assumptions about which modes of art and activism constitute the most potent forms of resistance to gay normalization by troubling the deeply ingrained notion that culture workers who position themselves at the vanguard (as opposed to the rear guard) of social movements actually forge the more forceful and sustained interventions in national political life. This case study explores what Hot-head's unique brand of retroactivism has to teach us about queers' complicity in the War on Terror.

The final chapter, "Unnatural Acts: The Tragic Consequences of Queer Homoliberalism in the Five Lesbian Brothers' *Oedipus at Palm Springs*," examines the personal and political costs of an LGBT movement that turns its back on gaiety. The Five Lesbian Brothers collectively author and stage outlandish experimental performances rooted in the parodic inversion of genres, cultural norms, and audience expectations. The troupe surprised audiences in 2005 when, after a lengthy hiatus, it returned with a work that is generically speaking a realist tragedy, but one that, I suggest, is best understood as what Freud called a cynical tendentious joke. This bourgeois, lesbian-themed *Oedipus* offers audiences a surprisingly normative worldview not to endorse the conservative political position it depicts but to challenge it. The Brothers play it "straight" with this play not because they have gone straight but because the gay and lesbian community has, and much to its own peril. This tragedy serves as a parable of the ruinous effects of homonormativity and a nuanced critique of the disastrous implications of homoliberalism. As such it constitutes a fitting conclusion to *Acts of Gaiety*, which dramatizes how in our quest for legitimization we homosexuals have come to take ourselves too seriously.

*Acts of Gaiety* peruses performances and protests by artists, activists, and collectives whose fiercely funny modes of social engagement pack the affective torque to counter the conservative yaw of homoliberalism. The works of these performance artists, playmakers, and political dissidents register as echoes of archaic dreams of revolution, and they make painfully clear the poverty of our current tactics and taxonomies for sexual expression. My hope is that the exploits of these backward-looking, visionary dykes can inspire us to retard the progress of the current homosexual agenda and to move instead gaily forward.