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Visibility as Paradox:

Representation & Simultaneous Contrast

Expanded from remarks delivered to the Media/Queered Seminar, Colloquia, and Symposium, University of Illinois at Chicago, spring semester 2004.

Ethnic, racial, and religious minorities within a given society usually raise up most of the heirs who will join their cultural heritage. Sexual minorities are unusual for not necessarily following that pattern. The youth who finds an identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender while growing up with LGBT parents or guardians is the exception, not the rule. Initially, those with few or no connections to others like themselves rely heavily on the media to find out about what eventually will become their chosen communities. As a result, an understanding of queer identity, community, or political life, especially at the beginning of a millennium rich in new technology, depends to some degree on understanding queer visibility in the media.

That same visibility, however, seems incoherent on first inspection, revealing a welter of incompatible expectations and outcomes. Coming out is supposed to reap benefits but often destroys personal relationships and may lead to social death in some circles or physical harm in others. Creating a queer marketplace provides employment for so-called professional homosexuals — reporters, travel agents, and the like — but may also create a ghetto. A sense of group or personal invisibility may persist even in the face of widespread popularity for queer characters in the media. And new technology promises to free everyone, but especially queer youths, from the shackles of geography, especially in rural and prejudiced places, but may end up

endangering users. These four paradoxes form the topics for each section of this volume: history, the professional, the popular, and technology.

The topics are paradoxes because they begin from assertions accepted as true about a positive good — progress, financial means, acceptance, and digital prowess — but the value in each case turns out to be at least partly negative, contrary to expectation. The assertions are at the same time true and false, although their main incongruity is not necessarily at the level of logic.

To explore the four topics, this essay describes each one and then turns to a disparate but overlapping set of theories for explanation. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have struggled with the paradoxes in the human condition of visibility and have arrived at similar concepts: *identification* in rhetoric, *contrast* in visual studies, *interpellation* in cultural studies, and *simultaneous contrast* in psychology. The dualities these terms encompass are less like a binary opposition, such as black-white, which Ferdinand de Saussure found in all language (where "there are only differences" [quoted in Derrida 1982]), and more like the deconstructive black–not-black of Jacques Derrida (1982).

Despite the variety of terms, all have the same aim: to describe what appears to be a central conundrum in experience. The simultaneity of being self and other, part of and distinct from community and society, is identifiable in language, appearance, and understanding but only through the existence of opposites. It is fashionable to argue in favor of multiplicity and to consider dualities merely linguistic, but they extend beyond language into human physiology. The experience of queer visibility presents a special case but illuminates a universal aspect of human life, the simultaneous contrast, conceptual and physical, of either/or and both/and conditions. Although there is no escape from that universal condition, it is possible to choose which contrasts to embrace and which to ignore.

The Paradox of Coming Out

Coming out has been one of the key narratives of queer identity for several decades. The coming out story imagines change as a progression, in a tale of progress, as John D'Emilio

suggests (in this volume). Coming out proposes a before state (closeted), a liminal state (the threshold or passage for coming out), and an after state (out). As individuals progress from the interior of the self to the exterior of the social and political worlds, clear improvements take place. For individuals, coming out moves the self from self-consciousness to selflessness, from duplicity to candor, and from isolation to inclusion. Through coming out, representations of the community move from the marginal to the mainstream. In other words, when few queers are out, the only ones visible are those whose showy behavior makes them un-closet-able, but those unusual (or even extreme) images yield to others more like the mainstream, as the less exotic queers emerge, confirming the familiar assertion: We are everywhere. In the larger polity, coming out stories move the nation and globe from ignorance (not knowing queers exist) to enlightenment (tolerance or even acceptance). In the face of these acts in human contexts, all institutional and legal barriers crumble. Coming out stories are like religious conversion narratives, with all the attendant emotions associated with epiphany, along with structural change in society.

The media play a central role in coming out. The history of coming out in the media documents the typical shift (see the chapter by Edward Alwood in this volume), in which the queer community moves from closeted object to *out* subject, a process that begins with experts and moral judges talking *about* queers and ends with queers allowed to talk for themselves. The media also supply archetypes, whose stories are variants of the mythic pattern: the comedienne who risks her career (Ellen DeGeneres), the ingénue-as-hostess who turns activist (Rosie O'Donnell), the athlete who stands against the world (Martina Navratilova), among other lesbians.

And there are examples from ordinary life, in venues such as the reality series, *Coming Out*, on the Logo Channel. Each episode enacts the coming out process before the camera: It begins with the protagonist living an interior life, considering little more than the closet walls that surround her, and facing a decision of whether to break out by telling that person most dear or least able to receive the news. The emplotment dwells in the liminal state, showing the

protagonist in scenes of everyday activity, with voice-overs that build faux suspense: Will she do it? Does she have enough courage? The viewing audience becomes the chorus calling (or thinking), "Come out, come out!" And in the end, she does come out, yielding a rush of tears to the accompanying flood of community feeling in the viewing audience. The antagonists in this drama — those key dear or weak ones — play their roles on cue, saying the right things before the camera: Coming out is acceptance, coming out is honesty, coming out is closeness. Only later, in the falling action of the plot, do these secondary characters sometimes falter. They decide (off camera) that being queer is not okay after all, that their acceptance is less than boundless, that they cannot continue the relationship as before. These encounters with the non-queer *other,* rather than raising doubts about coming out–as–liberation, teach indelible lessons: Coming out, for all its liberating force, is still hard. Coming out requires periodic reenactment. Behind these lessons, one element persists: coming out.

On another level, the series makes clear that even the ignorant and homophobic backwaters of American society know the script and will say their lines for the camera. Coming out has become a common trope, an easy, tacit reference to queer culture that has a million uses. A young man in the office where I work creates his own coming out extravaganza, arranging for many unsuspecting friends and acquaintances to gather at several sites where they can witness him exposed on television for what he is, not gay or transsexual or the like but another variety of queer: a straight man who does ballroom dancing. On television, celebrities talk of coming out about almost anything, sometimes kinky but usually not: fetishes, addictions, surgeries. Coming out is the hip term for telling secrets of all kinds.

Some skeletons appear to remain in the cupboard, such as sexuality between generations (see the chapter by Bruce Henderson in this volume). Sex in childhood is a forbidden subject that has a history not only of discussion spanning decades but of overt representation in books and film. The existence of a taboo is always an open secret. To ban anything, a culture must identify and classify the activity through discourse. Even when a taboo extends to the *discussion* of its object, discursive patterns of euphemism supply ample means for the society to represent the banned.

The Logo Channel itself illustrates the pattern of silence and speaking. The channel declares that "the word *Logo* is about identity, about being comfortable in your own skin" (http://www.logoonline.com/about/). MTV Networks, a division of Viacom, launched the digital station in 2005 ostensibly to serve LGBT audiences, with the tag line, "Programming that reflects our lives. Programming that tells our stories." However, selling advertising to corporations is what gives the channel economic viability, and its stated goal is to be "a sponsor-friendly cable channel." To deliver the queer audience to mainstream advertisers over cable and satellite networks, the Logo Channel bleeps out expletives and expurgates scenes to avoid giving offense to non-queer viewers, especially potential advertising clients. Those silences disguise queer experience, despite the channel declaring itself not just gay friendly but one with the LGBT communities.

Such seeming contradictions are part of what rhetoricians call *identification* (Burke 1969). Rhetorical identification occurs when any entity or person relates closely with another. In the case of two life partners, each individual in the close relationship is like two entities, one joined to the partner and the other separated as the self, but both existing at the same time. A particular queer person is also, for example, one with a broader circle of queer friends. Such dual existences always involve erasures and ambiguity like those of the Logo Channel.

The term *representation* also refers more broadly to the opposites contained in any assertion. To say anything involves asserting its opposite. There are countless instances: One cannot refer to oneself without implying the existence of another. Being queer sexually may involve finding oneself in the place expected of the opposite sex and, as a result, feeling in a sense both male or female at once. Queers not only experience an LGBT identity but may also operate in, and feel part of, a straight family and a heteronormative society. All these instances are "appeals to the common ground (sub-stance)" (Killingsworth 2005, 3), which underlies all communication. Making things visible by speaking is teeming with oppositions.

In the rhetoric of representation, both aspects of an assertion (black and white, for instance, or the self and other) exist inside, integrally, and all at once. The literary and performing arts

develop characters by separating out and embodying the opposing sides separately: antagonist to protagonist in literature, straight man to comedian in vaudeville, or leading character to foil in theatre. In the melodrama of coming out, a female friend can play the foil to a gay man, for instance. Like the typical foil, she is the opposite of the protagonist, female to his male, straight to his gay, and fertile to his supposed sterility (see the chapter by James Allan in this volume). When stories of gay men and straight women succeed, they expand the range of relationship possibilities, as does the (less often depicted) lesbian–straight-male friend story.

Coming out is an assertion that, through rhetorical representation, entails its opposite: going in. The experience can make sense only under conditions of hiding, and thinking in terms of coming out collapses a wide array of states — confusion, doubt, fear, silence, ignorance, or simple indifference — into one: the closet. One consequence of several decades of queer visibility has been the revelation that these other states are not all the same. Those who find a queer identity later in life — the generation that most relied on coming out to formulate a life narrative — illustrate the contrast. "I hate coming out stories," writes a longtime feminist, coming to terms with her own life. "No matter how I try to squash this collection of conflicting, disjunctive, contradictory experiences into a single clear-cut narrative, they just won't fit" (Stempel 1998, 1). For those who once lived lives as straight persons, becoming queer seems to force a choice between a complex story of unstable identity and a simple one, in which our earlier lives were a lie that coming out has finally put right. One way out of the quandary is to stop "revising away" one's own past and denying one's "period of heterosexual life" (Barnhurst 2001, 57) or, in other words, to reject coming out.

There have existed examples of queer citizens and activists who lived their lives without organizing it around such a ready-made story (see the essay by Studs Terkel in this volume). Viewed from within the closet narrative, these persons would seem to take enormous risks and persevere, despite hardship, just to be *out.* But being out was not always everyone's aim. Some queers live without regard to *out* or *in.* They don't buy into the dramatic emplotment that coming out provides. For them, the coming out story defines things not from inside their lives but from

the outside. Viewed without reference to coming out, they instead appear to lead ordinary lives, confronting a range of challenges and obstacles not unlike what others face. They avoid that particular form of rhetorical representation.

Living from day to day without the closet as reference is unusual, these days, because families, office-mates, and others expect the closet to be the main thread of the narrative one tells about queer life. In other words, the closet is now a story that straight folks have learned to expect. The closet narrative has become commercially convenient and so comfortable in the mainstream. It is a script that a non-queer perspective makes available, and queer folks play their part in growing numbers (Deb Price, "Gay Closet Doors Open Wide, Research Finds," *Detroit News,* 16 October 2006, http://www.detnews.com/). The closet has turned into a heteronormative plot device.

The Paradox of the Professional Queer

One outcome of gay and lesbian liberation has been the rise of the full-time homosexual, who works at the crossroads of queer and straight communities, at another of the boundaries of visibility. Professional groups establish a position in the marketplace by erecting barriers to entry, which prevent others from working in the same field. Limits on competition increase the cost of their services, which the groups justify by asserting a public service mission. Homosexuals cannot control entrance into the ranks of professionals; that power resides with the legal, medical, psychological, and other such associations, not with queers. But they do generally hold credentials, primarily in the form of education but also, in some cases, government licenses.

The rise of queer organizations, especially after the AIDS crisis began in the 1980s, expanded a niche in economic life. An array of organizations emerged to serve or cater to queers themselves and, more importantly, to represent queers to each other and to mainstream legal, social, and economic interests. Political groups, advertising agencies, research firms, and non-profit services joined the gay and lesbian press, and, together, they established or enlarged the

need for lobbyists, fundraisers, marketers, pollsters, human services and health workers, executives, and the like. That is the demand side.

On the supply side, being queer itself is the barrier to entry. To fill all the new jobs, holding a lifetime membership in the club — being queer — is important. Sexual minorities have always populated the professions, but this new brand of queer has turned being visible into an asset. Membership in queer communities gave them insider knowledge that added value to their professional qualifications. The value added depended in part on the existence of the closet.

A barrier surrounds career queers because of the prejudice against queers generally. Only a small subset manages to be out in the professions, and non-queer professionals are hesitant, under conditions of prejudice, to focus on queer clients. In short, the queer professional can operate as a specialized subgroup of a profession, but only because others either remain in the closet or are straight but avoid serving queers. Professional homosexuals can then claim, again because of discrimination, to provide a unique public service.

The so-called *homocrats* are especially valuable in an increasingly bureaucratic culture, that is, one where the scale and patterns of organizational life depend upon expertise. Mainstream bureaucracies, populated with members of the professions, have need of counterparts and peers in the queer world. Or, stated the other way round, the new queer organizations could not speak effectively to the mainstream except through professional discourse. Take the example of the news media. My case study of the reports that National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast during U.S. presidential campaigns found that, from the 1990s to the 2000s, attention shifted away from ordinary queer citizens as sources (Barnhurst 2003). The bland pronouncements of professionals from queer organizations replaced the pointed arguments of nonprofessional queers, whose voices diminished to the occasional slogan or outburst.

How did this happen? After Bill Clinton openly courted the gay vote in 1992, major news organizations began covering queer political issues regularly. The professional routines of journalism produced a gay and lesbian beat, making the coverage more frequent, more standard in length, and more predictable in structure (with such forms as the follow-up story, the sidebar

to the main story, and the like). Ordinary citizens lack the accoutrements of professionals: the offices and regular hours, with multichannel access (phone, fax, and e-mail) that make homocrats reachable, as well as the job titles, expertise, and credentials that make them authoritative. For journalists working on deadline, the queer on the street is hard to find, and a peer-to-peer source, one with a sound bite at the ready, is better.

As NPR journalists became more comfortable reporting on queer politics, the tone of the reporting became more positive. In a process I call *normalization,* the use of professional sources in standardized coverage yielded a feel-good veneer, an accommodation between journalists and their fluent, skilled (usually upper-middle class and white) homocrat sources. At the same time, the process accomplished a *pacification* of the queer audience, which yearns for any visibility at all, especially for such a safe and middling one. The representations matched the images emerging from homo-marketing, where queers look just like the mainstream (see the chapter by Katherine Sender in this volume). However, the growth in coverage was a mixed blessing, because journalists also applied the professional standard of balance, in which queer sources occupied one side in an uneven face-off with rivals from the extreme right wing. As with other news, queer political reports took part in widespread *polarization.* In accomplishing this balancing act, journalists come off as centrists, and LGBT demands for equal rights appear radical.

The professionalization of queer visibility had two other important aspects. Disagreements over representation always involve resistance to negative depictions, but the emergence of experts as activists changed the character of those arguments. Queer expertise seemed capable of making the face-off more professional (see the chapter by Vincent Doyle in this volume), with better organization and discipline more likely to exert control over the queer image in mainstream media. But gay and lesbian newspapers and magazines have become less activist as the U.S. market for queer media has become more professional and organized along industrial lines, with chain consolidation and conservative ownership (Ingall 2003). In other places, where a queer press is still emerging and continually struggling to survive, the potential for unsettling

the status quo still exists (see the chapter by Amit Kama in this volume). Queer media put homosexuals in control of the means of cultural production, but the dangers include the pursuit of mainstream production values, the superficial polish that serves up celebrity and sensationalism but excludes unglamorous queers leading ordinary lives.

Queer journalists face all the problems of mainstream society: sexism, market pressures, the slide into entertainment, and the like (see the essay by Tracy Baim in this volume). There remain zones away from urban centers where conservative audiences consider the mere statement that queers exist a form of promoting the so-called gay lifestyle (see the essay by Deborah Kadin in this volume). But even mainstream news organizations have room for queer journalists to be transgressive, reporting on a wide range of topics while challenging conventional ideas (see the essay by Jason DeRose in this volume). One strategy is co-optation, winning others over by joining them, making their issues into queer issues (see the essay by Ellen Meyers in this volume). Another is to be sensitive to the forms of mainstream discourse (see the essay by Laura Kipnis in this volume).

In the ideological process called *interpellation* (Althusser 2000), the larger hegemonic structures of society and culture hail to the individual. The concept is closely related to rhetorical representation but specifies one set of oppositions that assertions contain: the relation between the individual and the dominant culture. That culture, through interpellation, calls to the self, and, through the identifying act, the self enters into a network of associations that reinforce the existing relations of power.

An advertising supplement, Leading with Diversity, in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine* (25 September 2005, sec. 6, 101–144), illustrates one case of interpellation. The section ran more than three dozen pages of brief articles, concluding with one on "Domestic-Partnership Benefits." The texts hold together a score of ads from the likes of Bayer, Chevron, Dell, Hilton, Johnson & Johnson, Kodak, Mattel, McGraw-Hill, Merck, the NCAA, Starbucks, and UPS, along with lesser-known enterprises. An article titled "Out & Equal" claims that "diversity is more than black and white, male and female." It has come to "embrace a wide

spectrum of diverse groups," LGBT persons among them, along with distinct ethnic and national-origin groups, "the physically challenged, new hires, employees over 40, military veterans, religious minorities, and a host of other grass roots" groups (142). Another brief piece, "Making Diversity Work," proposes expanding diversity, so that "all employees feel they benefit" (141). Diversity no longer depends on legal protections or on a history of discrimination. It is a matter of individualism, open to any American. As a human resources senior vice president for Pitney Bowes remarks,

In the end, our belief is if you feel able as an individual to really give your talents without feeling that you have to fit into some predetermined mold, then we will get the best results. (143)

Such a view of diversity may seem incoherent or inarticulate but amounts to a demand for covering, so that persons with real differences blend in (Yoshino 2006). Diversity is then a feel-good slogan that exalts individuals, not groups, and does so to feed the corporate bottom line. "I matter because I am part of a team of talented professionals," says the smiling black man in shirt and tie, next to the headline, "What I do matters," in the *New York Times Magazine* advertising supplement (25 September 2005, sec. 6, 143). The ad for Sanofi Aventis, the third largest pharmaceutical company in the world, uses the tag line, "Because health matters." It concludes, "At the heart of all that matters are people, connected in purpose by career" and so forth (143). Professional identity becomes a containment system for individual difference, so that the dominant culture can interpellate or call to *individuals* without acknowledging a history of devaluing collective identities: their class, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, that is, their *kind.*

The Paradox of Popularity

Visibility benefits and suffers from its Oedipal relationship with the popular, with style, and with the market (see the essay by Deirdre McCloskey in this volume). In the *History of Sexuality,*

Foucault (1978) argues that a discourse of regulation exists when two conditions hold: first, when greater talk is taking place (about sexuality, for instance), and, second, when that talk occurs in the presence of widespread belief that instead silence prevails. The clamor and quiet are verbal forms of visibility and invisibility.

One of the least visible among queer groups is the aged. The West worships youth, and so, the logic goes, aging involves a gradual disappearance from the public eye. A film by Johnny Symons, *Beauty before Age* (New Day Films 1997), for example, asserts the power of youth in American culture, along with the lack of older role models, as its rationale. And yet the film itself helps fill that gap, undoing its own logic. It is one of many texts in the discourse of aging queerdom, going back to before the 1982 volume *Gay and Gray* (Berger 1996). A bibliography of the Affirm Network at SUNY Stony Brook lists more than 150 works on aging among queers from 1975 through 2001 (Burckell 2002), and the rate of publishing has accelerated, with nineteen appearing in the first decade, fifty-two in the second, and seventy-five in the final seven years. So there is increasing talk, a popularity in at least some quarters, but the belief that graying queers are invisible persists.

Queers have reached the same sort of invisible visibility throughout the life cycle, beginning with youth culture not only in fictional series such as *Queer as Folk*, but also in mainstream journalism. A *Time* magazine cover story, "The Battle over Gay Teens" (John Cloud, 10 October 2005, 43–51), uses a fundraiser for the Point Foundation, which supports scholarships for queer youths, to describe a movement widespread enough to spawn national attitude surveys, books from publishers including Harvard University Press, and secondary school gay-straight alliances so common that they go by their initials, GSAs, and have an organized political opposition. "At many schools around the country it is profoundly uncool to be seen as anti-gay," a bold pull-quotation proclaims, and the article concludes that the change occurred "with shocking speed" (51).

After youth comes the highly visible ritual of marriage (see the chapter by Marguerite Moritz in this volume). The marriage debate has grabbed repeated attention and sparked heated

controversy even within the liberal *New York Times,* which published a kind of ideological self-cleansing in its ombudsman column for having played cheerleader on the issue of marriage for same-sex couples (25 July 2004, Week in Review, sec. 4, 2). In the *Times Magazine,* the next phase of the queer life course, fledging the young, appeared just months later. The cover blurb announced an article, "Got a Problem with My Mothers? Coming of Age with Same-Sex Parents," a marketing version of the title for an article inside, "Growing up with Mom & Mom" (Susan Dominus, 24 October 2004, sec. 6, 69–75, 84, 143–144). In it, four women appear, two lesbian mothers and their two daughters, one lesbian, one straight. Of course, the article focuses on the straight one, Ry, and all the lesbians play the chorus. Ry uses "the drama of her family story" as an art project, a mixed-media piece that incorporates images of the family along with footage from television news, taped after a judge announced a decision concerning her parents' custody. Ry's experience illustrates her dual state: Homesick on semester abroad in Dublin, she goes with her boyfriend to a gay bar for a little home comfort, only to get turned away at the door for being straight.

Queer middle age has its own documentation, in Alan Ellis's (2001) collection and elsewhere, and, to bring the life course full circle, there is now coverage of the transition from mid-life into retirement. A June 11, 2006, Associated Press article, "Aging Gay Population Fuels New Housing Market: Nearly a Dozen Specialized Developments up and Running Nationwide," contains the usual combination of visibility and exposure. After an initial vignette gives the story a human hook, the anonymous journalist then parades out experts ("specialists in gay aging issues") and a set of predictable controversies: aging and reentering the closet, independence from blood families, assimilation and self-segregation. Following standard journalistic practice, the article presents two sides to each aspect of the story: the boosters of second-chance proms and other senior events versus a psychologist citing clients who say the idea sounds awful. Along the way, the article trots out the inevitable stereotypes of queers: the stigma and isolation, the estrangement from family, the trend setting in the arts, and the like. Readers get to meet all the

queers they know already: the lonely and childless, those suffering under discrimination, and the comic-relief characters, oh so precise about everything.

It is hard to imagine that, amid such detailed coverage of the entire life cycle, some queers remain invisible, and yet male sex workers are one such group (see the chapter by Gavin Jack in this volume). An examination of the reporting and research among support organizations in the United Kingdom illustrates the doubtful value of increased visibility. The paradox is that sex acts between men are an object of silence, rarely mentioned themselves, but that same silence contributes to the regulation of those sex acts. Another region at the edges of queer visibility is social class (see the chapter by Lisa Henderson in this volume). A nuanced understanding suggests that the discussion must move away from persons and toward material conditions of work and class structures.

Even in the pre-AIDS era, codes existed to make queers visible. In one project, *Gay Semiotics,* Hal Fischer (1977) catalogued the signs, archetypes, and fashions gay men used in San Francisco of the 1970s. The codes of queer communication give the lie to complaints about invisibility. Fisher's exhibition, which led to the book, came at the end of an era, when the knowledge of queer subcultural signs spilled out into public. The use of colored bandanas, for example, was a topic of straight conversation when I was a young adult deep in the American hinterland.

When marginal group codes move into the mainstream, they maintain a visible-invisible state. Cult films, for example, are at once well known and obscure. There seem always to be more of them joining the canon, and none ever leaves for under- or overexposure. Queer films, which may have a cult quality at least among LGBT audiences, demonstrate the trend. The University of North Carolina Libraries maintain a filmography of queer titles, which begins with the 1963 Jack Smith film, *Flaming Creatures,* and the 1970 release, *The Boys in the Band,* by William Friedkin. In the next decade, a handful of films emerged, including Edouard Molinaro's *La Cage aux Folles* of 1978. These older movies retain an obscurity desirable for cult status. But the intervals between new releases have grown shorter, and two dozen films joined the UNC

collection in each decade to follow (see http://www.lib.unc.edu/house/mrc/films and use the Filmfinder to search under the genre, Queer Cinema). The UNC collection is not exhaustive but illustrates what a serious mainstream collector might have considered worthy of preserving.

By the time a counter- or subcultural expression enters the mainstream, it may no longer exist or have the same currency and force for those who participated in it. Stuart Hall (1996) has described the process that occurs for indigenous cultures once their images and artifacts enter world capitalist commodity markets. Mass Western culture becomes fascinated by the paraphernalia of subcultures once their practical function has disappeared. For example, although labor has declined in U.S. America over the past century, "men's work finds continued expression in the culture as costume — jeans, undershirts, and work boots flourish in the absence of the laborer" (Barnhurst 1996, 101). Queers now wear invisibility as a fetish, not recognizing the evidence it provides that queer invisibility itself has vanished. But the *story* of invisibility persists, like a folk tale the older generation continues recounting to chasten the young.

The waxing and waning of popularity seem the outcome of collective whim, but haphazard changes are no longer the rule. Styles become obsolescent throughout the fashion world, not in response to shifting public tastes but in service to the fashion industry. The idea of *planned* obsolescence is relatively new, having emerged only in the 1920s. Facing a saturated market and slowing purchases, Alfred Sloan, Jr., the head of General Motors, is said to have begun pushing for the automobile industry to begin changing the style of products to spur sales (Rothenberg 1999). The new form of obsolescence depended on superficial style, turning consumption into a symbolic act rather than a response to human wants. Consumption for the leisure classes may always have been *conspicuous* (Veblen 1899), but the new form expanded flashy consumption to the working and middle classes. The Great Depression of the 1930s spurred American business to expand style obsolescence to a broad range of products, as a method of *Consumer Engineering,* the title of a cheerleading book published in 1932 (Sheldon & Arens). Culture industries have continued the practice since then.

Recent political history demonstrates how an engineered visibility is useful for the enemies of queer communities. In elections of the 2000s, the political handlers of U.S. President George W. Bush encouraged widespread discussion, debate, and fear by making queer relationships a planned element of campaigning in specific states and localities. If public relations experts are correct, even negative exposure is good for any group or client, but that argument relies on this assumption: that visibility operates like a mechanical ratchet, so that each increase sets a new bottom limit. In this sense, visibility is like a financial instrument, a liquid commodity that tends, as economists say, to be price inflexible in the downward direction. Visibility of the sort the Republican Party has engineered transforms queer culture and identity into a fearful beast that looms but is easy to vanquish. Queers want an end to that sort of visibility, want to strike down the right-wingers who fathered it.

Each aspect of popularity — the invisible visibility of queers throughout the life course, the circulation of well-known secret codes, the residue of artifacts that persist after their users have faded away, and the grassroots enthusiasm that political and culture industries engineer — each one contains the paradox. Popularity is heightened visibility that implies its opposite: the fall from grace, the loss *and* the public adulation. Visual theory suggests a simple concept, *contrast,* to understand the quandary.

In its simplest sense, contrast is inherent in every form. Placing a dot on a field (a canvas in painting, but also a page in the media or a screen on line) sets up a contrast. The spot asserts its shape, darkness, scale, location, and so forth by implying the opposite. A dot brings the field into the viewer's awareness, in a relationship between *figure* and *ground.* Every figure must inescapably sit on a background, and the existence of one implies the existence of the other. A similar phenomenon occurs in every aspect of popularity.

Seen without its inherent contrast, popularity is an illusion that gets in the way of understanding. The phasing in and out of style of different identity groups in Western capitalism is one-dimensional, because no commodity is ever far from commercial reach. Each is just as visible in times of invisibility. During the gloomy period of queer suppression, in mid-twentieth-

century America, every family seemed to know about a cousin who ran off to the big city on the coast. "Uncle Hub moved to New York City," went the line in one family I knew. The intonation told the rest of the tale. Knowledge that queer folks exist is a constant. When media popularity wanes, interpersonal innuendo waxes. The hearers love these fill-in-the-blank stories more than any episode of *Will and Grace*. Through contrast, visible and invisible are coexistent states, always present because one implies and depends upon the other.

The Paradox of Technology

Millennial notions about new technology have colonized conceptions of future queer visibility. Millennialism, of course, grew from religious expectations (Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and indigenous) for a paradise on earth, a golden age when the ills of society vanish as a result of historical processes. Because the term *millennial* refers to a thousand years, ends of centuries can usher in a period of millennial thinking, but specific developments can do the same. In the mid- to late 1990s, the rise of the internet promised to foster freedom and independence for individuals and to advance democratic and economic equality for societies.

Millennialism holds out hope of a better earthly life for the downtrodden, from persecuted religionists in the ancient world to oppressed minorities today. Such hopes seem especially apt for queer communities. By 1999, in China, for example, the low cost of on-line publishing and even lower cost of internet access made it possible to circumvent state controls. According to one account, gay men

> now have a web site listing gay bars. One gay man in Beijing downloads interesting articles
> on homosexuality from the internet, translates them into Chinese, and distributes them to
> friends. And they can now talk to one another through such e-mail addresses as
> *chinagay@hotmail.com.* (Jan Wong, "Comrades on the Net," *Australian,* 30 September 1999,
> Features sec., M-14)

Internet radio soon followed, and, in 2000, queers had eight stations broadcasting from Hong Kong to the mainland and elsewhere on RadioRepublic.com (Carolyn Ong, "HK Service Boasts 105 Channels in English and Cantonese; Entrepreneur Runs with a Revolutionary Radio Plan," *South China Morning Post,* 15 February 2000, Technology Post sec., 3). Shortly thereafter, press agencies reported "growing acceptance of sexual diversity" in China (Rachel Morarjee, "For China's Gay Community, a Quiet Liberation Is Afoot," *Agence France Presse*, Dateline Shanghai, 15 January 2001, International News sec.).

Similar reports emerged from the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. Computer technology made it easier for queers to find each other in South Africa (Naomi Wolf, "New Sex Revolution," *Johannesburg Sunday Times,* 26 January 2003, Arts, Culture & Entertainment sec., 12). Al-Bawaba, a news service headquartered in Amman, Jordan, and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, reported, "With the growth of the use of the internet, it seems Arab gays, lesbians as well as bisexuals and transgenders [*sic*] have found new places they can call home" ("Summer Lovin': Arab Gays, Lesbians Coming Out of the Closet . . . ?" *Al-Bawaba*, 7 August 2003, http://www.albawaba.com)

For those facing discrimination because of sexual difference, the availability of new communication media seemed to allow users to set aside the visibility quandary. Queer folks are unlike the women or persons of color whose outward traits make them readily visible. The internet changes the stakes for these users, who can operate without revealing their identifying traits upon first encounter. The internet is supposedly the great leveler, so that even white men cannot assume others on line recognize their physical strength or whiteness. At the same time, queers can assume total openness on line with minimal risk. In cyberspace, everyone is potentially queer, and so the internet *queers* just about every aspect of life, such as race on gay dating sites and elsewhere (see the chapter by Han Lee in this volume). Exposing one's identity in a zone away from the physical body also seems perfectly safe.

Millennial thinking has a dark side in the fears of apocalypse that accompany hopes for renewal. The most extreme example of the destructive tendencies accompanying the millennial

urge is Nazism (Fenn 2003), which had a direct impact on queer persons. In recent history, the arrival of the year 2000 (Y2K) coupled a thousand-year date (however arbitrary in origin) with forecasts of technical doom, and not without consequences for queers. The so-called *millennial bug,* resulting from the failure of programmers to plan for dates longer than two digits (as in 99 for 1999), raised fears in societies reliant on computers for activities from banking to utilities. In the general climate of anxiety, gays and lesbians specifically became a target for extremist groups. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued a report in late 1999 "warning police chiefs across the country" about "groups preparing for violence as New Year's Eve approaches," which listed gay men and lesbians, along with African Americans, Jews, and others, among potential targets of the radical right (David A. Vise & Lorraine Adams, "FBI Warns of Millennial Violence Risk; Police Vigilance Urged as New Year Approaches," *Washington Post,* 31 October 1999, Final Edition, A-1).

The end-of-time jitters seem to have calmed since then, but the dual promise of freedom and risks of exposure — identity theft being the most disturbing, besides physical vulnerability to stalking and the like — have not subsided (see the chapter by David Phillips in this volume). The existence of two opposites together, and their interaction with each other, is a puzzle called *simultaneous contrast,* which has troubled thinkers from ancient philosophers to recent psychologists.

Simultaneous contrast occurs because any element changes noticeably when in the presence of other elements, compared to its appearance in isolation. The concept appears in the writings of thinkers from Aristotle to Sir Isaac Newton, with the Arab natural philosopher of the Middle Ages Ibn Al Haytham in between them (Kingdom 1997). It emerged in commercial discourse among dye makers of France, who matched a color as instructed, only to fall under royal censure because the threads (identical in isolation) no longer matched when woven next to other colors in tapestry (one of the tropes of multiculturalism today). The chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul documented the fact that contiguous colors "appear as dissimilar as possible" (1887, 11), and, later, the German-born American abstract painter and designer Josef Albers (1975) asserted that

the effect is deceptive, that is, a pathology. More recent critiques raised questions about whether simultaneous contrast results from physiology or judgment (Lee 1981). These ideas may seem far afield, but they correspond at many points with identity issues familiar to scholars of queer studies, such as controversies surrounding the idea of *normal,* the so-called gay gene, and nature versus nurture.

Millennial thinking is one instance of simultaneous contrast because the existence of hope and fear at the same time has an impact on each. The hope is more poignant, and the fear is more pointed. The palpable changes seem rooted in the mind. For instance, a straight man may experience simultaneous contrast in his sense of self upon discovering the presence of queers around him. Psychology has had a long history of examining the phenomenon. It emerged in the 1866 work of Hermann von Helmholtz (1962), and, decades later, William James (1981) weighed in on the debate over whether simultaneous contrast is psychological or physiological. Gestalt theorists, of course, viewed both aspects as inherent in holistic experience (Behrens 1998). Recent work in perception includes many studies on the simultaneously contrasting judgments of self and others (see Biernat, Manis, & Kobrynowicz 1997, for an overview).

Around the turn of the millennium, the gay press stirred up the air of anxiety and hope by calling attention to the link between visibility and bashing. The murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 brought gays to the forefront of national attention, and then, during early 2000, California passed Proposition 22, banning same-sex couples from marrying, and the *Advocate* magazine reported increases in attacks on queers. That pattern of coverage has continued since then. On April 27, 2004, a special section on marriage included a piece on "Marriage's Bloody Backlash" (Christopher Healy, *Advocate,* 38–40). It reported National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs data: In the six months following the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that overturned sodomy laws, hate incidents based on sexual orientation increased 24 percent nationally (43 percent in New York City alone) and almost doubled in Colorado. A sidebar in the *Advocate* issue pulled out an earlier example: an article on Anita Bryant's campaign to repeal nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation in Miami, with the title, "Ever since Dade County, Gay People Are Being

Beaten and Murdered in Increasing Numbers." The sidebar shows the front cover of the April 2, 1981, magazine, then published on tabloid-size newsprint, with a graphic illustration of bashing (2004, 25). The exhilaration of visibility and the agitation of attendant hate crimes play off and change each other.

Of all queers, the young seem the most vulnerable (see the chapter by Larry Gross in this volume), in spite (or because) of the freedom that new technology provides. Facts on the ground do not seem to support the image of technological liberation. The *New York Times* reported during pride celebrations of 2004 that "the identity-affirming pitch of gay rights advocates" combines with media portrayals, especially "the feel-good wit of television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,*" to "encourage adolescents to declare their sexuality" (Andrew Jacobs, "For Young Gays on Streets, Survival Comes before Pride," 27 June 2004, New York Report, A-21). Thousands of them ended up homeless, exposed to "drugs, hustling, violence, and the virus that causes AIDS," and one of the few shelters that works to get them off the street had a waiting list of more than one hundred.

The sad statistics reassert the fate of physical bodies in the digital age. The rise of new communication technologies at the end of the millennium may have raised hope for queers, especially the young under the control of heteronormative families and communities but also those under repressive national regimes around the world. The paradox, of course, is that the same persons expecting digital freedom experience physical attacks and discrimination. The existence of high expectations changes the tenor of the dangers, so that both states exist in simultaneous contrast to each other. These two states are one, incorporated into the mindset of a millennial age.

Resisting Paradox

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick described the impossible contradictions of queer identity in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). In one memorable example, she recounts the quandary of an eighth-grade science teacher in Maryland, who lost his post after revealing he was gay. By

choosing to speak to the media about losing his teaching post, he brought what the Board of Education considered (and the federal court ruled to be) improper attention to his sexuality. Upon appeal, the Fourth Circuit Court upheld the verdict but disagreed with its logic. Instead, the justices argued that he had acted improperly by *failing to speak* of his sexuality when completing the original job application. In each ruling, the teacher's sexuality itself was not, ostensibly, at issue. It was his *visibility* that mattered. The "management of information," about queer identity, says Sedgwick , is so vulnerable "that the space for simply existing as a gay person who is a teacher is in fact bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden" (70).

When legal systems do address sexuality itself, a similar paradox emerges, because queerness appears at once innate and acquired. German advocates for decriminalization in the nineteenth century asserted that homosexuality is naturally occurring. The argument, after some initial success, led the Prussian state to stop treating queers as criminals subject to fixed-term imprisonment and instead to incarcerate them for life as members of a degenerate species (Halperin 1995). In twentieth-century America, U.S. courts have ruled in some cases that homosexuals deserve no civil protections, because homosexuality is not an innate characteristic, but held in other cases that homosexuals are "criminals *as a class*" (34). Therefore, "if homosexuality *is* an immutable characteristic, we lose our civil rights, and if homosexuality is *not* an immutable characteristic, we lose our civil rights," concludes David M. Halperin, who then asks, "Anyone for rational argument on these terms?" (34).

The difficulty with these paradoxes is that they seem to present impossible binds from which queers cannot ever find escape. Paradoxes usually yield to analysis, which can unmask the conflicts, haziness, and lies within the original premises, but some paradoxes are more obdurate. Queer visibility seems to be of the latter sort, a true contradiction, which asserts its opposite within itself and has no resolution. The way to understanding, as in so many other cases for queer folk, is through literature and the arts. "In reality opposites are one; art shows this," says the aesthetic realist Eli Siegel (1967).

The principal tools for understanding are words and images, seeing and saying. From language come the notions of rhetorical representation and of cultural interpellation. One observes the broad and inescapable existence of oppositions within any utterance, and the other observes the narrower operation of dominant power on subordinate selfhood and identity. From images come the notions of contrast in art and simultaneous contrast in psychology. One observes the same broad and inescapable existence of oppositions but this time in vision, and the other observes that those contrasts always operate on and change each other. These related notions contribute to a general concept: the difference at the root of all human vision and expression. The concept does not resolve contradictions but heightens awareness of their relationships. A simple acknowledgement that difference is inescapable is the first step toward understanding what is at stake in queer visibility.

That acknowledgement is also the first step toward knowing what to do about queer visibility. The necessary action is to reject the question of visibility, to set it aside, and to choose something other than focusing on queer difference. This path is something like *différance* in post-structuralism (Derrida 1982), a call to defer, delay, and temporize rather than engage in the available stories about queer difference.

In August 2006, the *Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students* listed the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) among the most gay-friendly campuses in the United States (Bruce C. Steele & Neal Broverman, "College Made Easy," 29 August 2006, http://www.advocate.com). UIC trumpeted the ranking on its web site and in the campus newspaper, the *UIC News* (6 September 2006, 3). Having experienced harassment at my previous university (Barnhurst 2001), I know how good it is at UIC. But the most recent Campus Climate Assessment found that almost a quarter of LGBT respondents at UIC said they had experienced harassment, almost 19 percent of the men, 29 percent of the women, fully half of the bisexuals, and 100 percent of those in the closet. The results reported a significant correlation between harassment and negative assessments of the campus. These two survey results contradict each other, and they illustrate the trap of difference. Being a gay-friendly campus is good and bad at the same time. It makes the

climate intolerable and cause for celebration, each quality heightening the other. But, for me,

living in the incongruity of (a) a gay-friendly campus where (b) undergraduates drop my courses

upon learning I am gay, the best strategy is to defer, to put to one side this particular difference

and move on to other things.

"There is no binary division" that permeates discourse, according to Michel Foucault (1978,

27). Here is a hopeful idea: that somewhere in discourse it is possible to avoid a given paradox.

He goes on: "We must try to determine the different ways of not saying these things" (27).

Following that advice, queers must find different ways of not saying such things as these:

organizing our stories around the closet, ministering professionally to our invisibility, celebrating

our popularity, and hoping for a technological, queer utopia.

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