Visibly Marked:
'Gaydar' and the Politics of Queer Intelligibility

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<u>Abstract</u>

By tracing the historical and social formation of a dominant queer subjectivity and subsequently problematizing the appropriation of 'gay styles' for mainstream audiences, this thesis attempts to explain the contemporary usages of 'gaydar' and expose its practices as inextricable from the operations of capitalism, consumption, and commodity culture. The foregrounding of a homo-normative gay subject renders invisible non-dominant queer individuals and groups as well as functions to conceal the inseparability of determinants of identity by paralleling and exploiting the labor of unacknowledged 'others'. My analysis of issues of visibility deconstructs culturally intelligible significations, notions of identity, and codes of normalcy, while simultaneously revealing the complex politics of queer intelligibility to be intricately linked to processes of commodification.

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This project is dedicated to the CEU gender kids of 2009...

Introduction

'Gaydar' is considered to be a non-academic, mainstream slang term understood and functioning within a Western, First World context; despite its colloquial usage, the normalizing effects of its employment and implications for and within queer cultures must be attended to, analyzed, and questioned in order to explore and disclose its problematic foundational assumptions. By engaging with the contemporary notion of 'gaydar' I will articulate the historical and social formation of a dominant queer subjectivity engendered by the operations of capitalism in United States commodity culture and identify how such a formation functions at the expense of non-dominant and non-normative modes of queer intelligibility. It is crucial to problematize common understandings of 'gaydar' so as to reveal how a particular gay subjectivity comes to be a 'recognizable' person through culturally intelligible significations, notions of identity, and codes of normalcy.

In order to address the links between consumer culture and queer visibility, it is important to understand how the historical development of capitalism was instrumental in bringing about a modern 'gay identity'. John D'Emilio, in "Capitalism and Gay Identity," argues that gay history emerged as a product of the evolution of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the West. Specifically, the rise of waged labor and the expansion of capital made the necessary conditions possible for a *visible* homosexual identity as well as a gay subculture to be forged. By tracing the development of free market labor, he illustrates several ways in which both the ideological and material structure and meaning of "the family" as well as "heterosexual relations" were radically transformed. I will use D'Emilio's text as a lens through which to analyze my arguments involving the uses of 'gaydar' and the politics of queer intelligibility.

There seems to be no dominant practice explicitly named and in dominant circulation in mainstream culture similar to that of 'gaydar' depicting the natural ability to 'read' identity

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formations, for instance one's religious or ethnic identity. 'Gaydar' is foregrounded as a mainstream linguistic term in dealing with sexuality whereas opportunities for similar terms, independent from attachments to 'gaydar', do not surface. Eve Sedgwick accounts for how the 'process' of 'coming out' as gay is different from that of "a Jew or Gypsy" in the sense that, "the Jew has at least notionally some discretion over other people's knowledge of her or his membership in the group," and one could "come out as a Jew, in a heterogeneous, urbanized society much more intelligibly than one could typically come out as, say female, Black, old, a wheelchair user, or fat."[1] Despite visual markers signifying an individual's 'gayness' (which will be shown to be both "notionally discreet" and intelligibly 'obvious', depending on the specificity of the context), "blackness," or "femaleness," for reasons unknown and beyond the scope of this thesis, 'gaydar' and its normative markers of sexuality remain in dominant circulation in popular culture, while other identity categories do not foreground a similar term as such. However, it will be shown in later chapters that 'gaydar' and the politics of visibility in racial, class, and sexual identities cannot be uncritically paralleled or easily separated. My research and arguments for this project are located in situated discourse analysis. To substantiate my claims, I will be analyzing media representations of complex advertising strategies, popular gay and lesbian signifiers modeled on contemporary bodies and images, and scholarly research studies conducted by academics in the field of social science and psychology.

The ways in which I engage with 'gay,' 'lesbian,' and 'queer' must be clarified. 'Gay' and 'lesbian' are used here with the knowledge that they incorporate sexual implications (men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women, although not exclusively), presumptions about stylistic qualities and fashion indicators, as well as historically contingent meanings and interpretations. Both terms should also come with the

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[1] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Epistomology of the Closet." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (eds.) Routledge: New York and London, 1993, p. 50.

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understanding and recognition that sexuality and sexual orientation function as inseparable from other identity categories such as race, class, ethnicity, and nationality; although none should be taken as or assumed to be parallel and analogous to any other unless points of congruence are appropriately explained and attended to in specific contexts. 'Gay' will also be used when referring to both gay men and lesbians, unless otherwise qualified in the text. The meanings, implications, uses, and consequences of 'queer' are never self-evident, but rather depend upon the speaker, whom is being addressed, and in consideration of and with specific awareness given to elements of space and time. It must be understood that the meanings of 'queer' are constantly shifting, which therefore render the term contradictory to itself when any attempt is made to pin down a clear and stable definition. For the purposes and scope of this paper, 'queer' will be used to discuss and describe non-normative sexualities and remain inseparable from the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian'. Additionally, although the politics of transsexuality and transgender theory are not explicitly problematized or discussed in this paper, my analysis of queer intelligibility can be applied to transgender experiences in certain contexts.

Although 'gaydar' is understood as slang and often discussed informally,[2] its definitions, functions, and uses have material and ideological consequences on the lived experiences of queer people as well as mainstream heterosexual society. The practices and foundational assumptions of 'gaydar' are inextricable from the operations of capitalism, consumption, and commodity culture as each social totality shapes the mechanisms of usages. In my analysis to come, I shall critically engage with the usages of 'gaydar' and the operations of consumer capitalism in order to expose the processes of "socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" that produce specific gay subjectivities.[3] As Rosemary

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[2] Shelp 2003, p. 2
[3] Hennessey, Rosemary. "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture." In *Social Postmoderism: Beyond Identity Politics*, Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (eds.) Cambridge University Press: 1995, p. 147.

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Hennessey asserts, "we need a way of understanding visibility that acknowledges both the local situations in which sexuality is made intelligible as well as the ties that bind knowledge and power to commodity production, consumption, and exchange."[4] It is my intention to "make visible the practices of visibility itself"[5] by examining complexities in the production and consumption of queer identities in mainstream culture.

Chapter 1: Contemporary Understandings and Employment of 'Gaydar'

1.1 Usages and Assumptions

The meaning and practices of 'gaydar,' carry many implications. The term itself is understood by dominant culture to be a combination of 'gay' and 'radar' and commonly refers to one's "ability" to read or recognize an individual's sexual orientation and/or 'gay' characteristics. According to the "UrbanDictionary," those who possess 'gaydar' can usually "sense" or "feel gayness" in another in addition to being able 'read' one's sexuality based off of visual indicators.[6] An example of visibly signifying one's sexual orientation can be found in Judith Halberstam's, *Female Masculinity*, where she refers to a description of "tips" that "focus almost obsessively on the care that must be taken by the transsexual man not to look like a butch lesbian." Such tips include "dress[ing] preppy as opposed to the standard jeans and leather jacket look of the butch," as well as "warn[ing] against certain haircuts (punk styles or crew cuts) that are supposedly popular among butches."[7] Similarly, practices of 'gaydar' can be witnessed in mainstream media representations, movies, television, and advertising spaces. For example in the second episode of the first season of the Showtime series, *The L Word*, the popular lesbian characters discussed "rules" for telling if a woman is a lesbian; stipulations of heterosexuality included long versus short fingernails, high-heeled

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[4] Hennessey 1995, 177
[5] Alcoff, Linda Martin. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 194.
[6] http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gaydar
[7] Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 1998, p. 156.

shoes, and other markers signifying normative femininity.[8] Visual signifiers assumed to be indicative of sexual identity will be explained at length in the chapters to follow.

The linguistic term of 'gaydar' used to describe the phenomenon of symmetrical alignment between sexuality and gender makes several problematic assumptions. First, it inherently assumes and advocates a binary division of both gender and sexuality. Secondly, it posits sexuality as a necessarily bounded and stable identity of sameness, without attending to the implications and/or social conditions of using 'identity' as a concept itself. Finally, the assumption of mutual recognition of 'gayness' and its limitations presupposes that there are in fact universal and monolithic standards of gay intelligibility that not only function in dominant culture but purport to reveal 'truths' that would otherwise stay hidden or be kept secret. 'Gaydar' immediately posits deterrence from a binary heterosexual norm and sets up a figure of 'otherness.' The standards from which 'others' are measured against are made visibly clear through assumed modes of white, middle-class, bourgeois significations of normalcy promoted by commodity capitalism.

1.2 Scholarly Research

In 2003, the *Journal of Homosexuality* published an academic study purporting to grasp the accuracy of one's "skill" in determining an individual's sexual orientation as well as offer a "theory of gaydar" to explain "the motivation behind the development of the skill among gay and lesbian people."[9] In this study, namely "Gaydar: Visual Detection of Sexual Orientation Among Gay and Straight Men," Scott Shelp distinguishes between two types of 'gaydar'; that of "generic gaydar," that is seen as "the general notion of being able to look

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[8] http://www.sho.com/site/lword/previous_episodes.do?episodeid=119236
[9] Shelp 2003, 1-2

and tell who is gay,"[10] versus "adaptive gaydar," which is viewed as "a more specific definition" including

> a special intuitive or perceptual sensibility (sense-ability) of gay people to detect subtle identifying characteristics in other gay people, the development of which is motivated by the desire to remove feelings of isolation many have experienced growing up gay, and the basic human need for association with like others.[11]

Shelp substantiates his claims by referencing psychological research on the "belongingness hypothesis," which "characterizes belonging as a basic human need," and stresses the importance of social bonds as "fundamental and pervasive."[12] Shelp links this hypothesis to "the experience of isolation" that gay people purportedly feel "from being stigmatized," and determines that because the need to form and maintain social bonds is "a basic human need," and because "gay people" experience isolation and struggle for association, *they* develop (or experience the emergence of) "a unique perceptual ability/coping mechanism" as a matter of survival.[13]

More recently in 2008, results to a series of five research studies conducted by Tufts University were published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* whereby Nalini Ambady and Nicholas Rule attempted to gauge the ability of individuals to judge the sexual orientation of gay and straight men. The researchers describe their tests as attempting to, "examine individuals' actual and self-assessed accuracy when judging male sexual orientation from faces and facial features," and admit that, "differences in the accuracy of judgments based on targets' controllability and perceivers' awareness of cues provides insight into the processes underlying intuitive predictions and intuitive judgments."[14] The research concluded that participants made "accurate judgments from multiple facial features" that

[10] Shelp, Scott G. "Gaydar: Visual Detection of Sexual Orientation Among Gay and Straight Men." *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 44(1), 2003, p. 2.

[11] Shelp 2003, 2

[12] Shelp 2003, 5

[13] Shelp 2003, 5-6

[14] Ambady, Nalini; Rule, Nicholas O.; Adams Jr., Reginald B.; Macrae, C. Neil. "Accuracy and Awareness in the Perception and Categorization of Male Sexual Orientation." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Volume 95, Issue 5(Nov.), 2008, pp. 1019-1028, abstract.

were considered "controllable," and "obvious cues for extracting social category information." However, "nonobvious cues (information from the eyes and mouth area)" yielded the necessity for "intuitive judgments."[15] Taking the experiment one step further, Rule and Ambady "standardized the faces"[16] of people whose pictures were being tested by "superimposing male faces onto a white background" so as to negate possibilities of being influenced by certain hairstyles or other visual markers.[17]

The main concerns of research studies on the practices of 'gaydar' have to do with their shared assumptions about its circulation and usages that rest on questions of truth, existence, and often desirability for the purposes of, as Shelp makes clear, "understanding the experience of gay people, *their* need for association, *their* struggles with finding 'others like me' and the adaptive strategies *they* use to help *them* meet *their* basic need for association."[18] In addition to the (homophobic) us/them hierarchy that Shelp's discourse creates, his understanding also results in an emphasis on measuring the accuracy and precision of one's "skills" in 'gaydar' as well as in constructing a mythical narrative of gay isolation, loneliness, and necessary migration, when it is more useful to question the normalizing and often oppressive mechanisms used in the its deployment. For example, examining the 'truth' or accuracy of 'gaydar' rests on the assumption that 'gaydar' actually does exist. If so, does it work and is it accurate? Do gay people have a 'better' and more skilled perception of it than straight people? How can *I* acquire or improve my own 'gaydar'? When the question of 'truth' arises in reference to 'gaydar,' there is a tendency to explore how and why 'gaydar' 'works' rather than problematizing *for* whom it 'works' and *by* whom its mechanisms get perpetuated.

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[15] Ambady and Rule 2008, abstract
[16] http://www.tuftsdaily.com/gay-and-straight-ph-d-student-learns-rules-1.744926, September 12, 2008.
[17] Bering, Jesse. "There's Something Queer about that Face." *Scientific American*. February 23, 2009.
[18] Shelp 2003, 14, emphasis mine

1.3 Deconstructing Scholarly Research

Research and common understandings of 'gaydar' serve to reinforce the idea that 'gay people' indeed have 'natural differences', and that such differences are manifested outwardly and can be perceived through visual markers. The research studies simultaneously reinforce the erasure of racial and class differences, producing a monolith of some imaginary gay culture. The research methods and conclusions disallow for identity categories to be intertwined and inseparable from sexuality, in favor of putting forth a racially unmarked (read: white) gay subjectivity. For instance, Rule and Ambady take for granted what are considered "obvious cues" of one's sexual orientation; they refer to hairstyle, jewelry, and facial expression and attempt to "control" these cues by "standardizing faces" of their subjects; yet they neglect to define whose standards such features are being measured against.

Similarly, although Rule and Ambady offer recognition that certain "underlying processes" contribute to "predictions" about sexual orientation; their passive acknowledgment of such "processes" lack a critical analysis into what they are and how they work. Rule and Ambady's research both reinforces and is contingent upon heteronormative assumptions (and anxieties) about the need for continuity in gender and sexual identities, a point which will be further explained in chapter two. Their references to individuals' "intuitive judgments" about sexuality gives credibility to the existence of some inborn 'natural instinct' inherent in all gay people rather than to the production of codes of intelligibility by commodity culture, which will be elaborated in the following chapter. The arguments put forth by Shelp, Rule, and Ambady implicitly present a desirable norm through what they choose to exclude, while at the same time (the threat of) any spaces that may reveal possible variation from this norm are abruptly foreclosed. Their research operates through exclusions by only offering a certain *kind* of gay person as either desirable or undesirable while never making explicitly clear who is able to be incorporated into the ambiguous but

definitive term "gay." But more to the point, this reinforcement and homogenization hinges on the assumption that gay people are born with a specific capacity to tell gay and straight people apart.

Finally, the conclusions of the research studies on 'gaydar' also reinforce several universal myths circulative about experiences of "gay people" in Western homo-normative narratives. For instance, the myth of an "isolated" gay identity that is in need of discovery and the concomitantly popular belief that all "gay people" share a collective, linear history and experience of isolation, marginalization, struggle, and community. The idea of "discovering" homosexuality is usually followed by the belief in a necessary migration to an urban center[19] in search of, as Shelp argues, "like others." However, "finding a partner for homosexual activity was no guarantee of feeling part of a larger group," but rather should be taken as indicative of "participation in a gay *imaginary*" and not "some empirical 'discovery' of pregiven desires within the self," as disputed by Kath Weston in *Long, Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science.*[20]

Weston offers her conception of a "gay imaginary" to reveal not only how gays and lesbians come to be designated as "a people" by being "bound up with the search for sexual partners and the construction of a lesbian or gay identity" (which is further explained in chapter two, section two where the conflation of sexual preference with sexual identity formation is historically located), but also how "lesbian and gay identity could be claimed in the absence of sexual activity."[21] Shelp's definition typifies this point when he argues that "most gay people" (or "they" as he refers to us) have been marginalized throughout history and subsequently lacked "the basic human need for association with like others," which

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[19] Weston, Kath. "Get Thee to a Big City." In *Long, Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science*. Routledge: New York and London, 1998, p. 30.
[20] Weston 1998, 34, emphasis in text
[21] Weston 1998, 34

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therefore works to support his claims of queer identity discovery precisely through the *lack* of sexual activity (and apparently, according to Shelp, any other form of intimacy as well).

Likewise, the idea of a shared history of seclusion promoted by Shelp mystifies the actual experiences of oppression in laws, policies, and cultural beliefs and how each has differentiating and disproportionate effects on individual groups. John D'Emilio explains that because, "most lesbians and gay men in the 1960's first discovered their homosexual desires in isolation, unaware of others, and without resources for naming and understanding what they felt," myths of "silence, invisibility, and isolation" were constructed by lesbians and gay men and taken as "the essential characteristics of gay life in the past as well as the present."[22] This illustrates the complicity of gays and lesbians in projecting those oppressive laws, policies, and cultural beliefs into "an image of the abysmal past" where all "gay men and lesbians [have always been] the victims" of oppression,[23] as well as contributes to Shelp's reductive and generalizing conclusions about gay people. The perpetuation of myths about gay histories (which consequently advance *a* bounded and equalizing dominant narrative of 'Gay History') serve to underscore the problematic mechanisms of 'gaydar' and also attest to the racial, ethnic, class, and social differences that go unacknowledged by its operations, thus rendering invisible the complexities and inseparability of such identity categories.

Chapter 2: Commodity Capitalism and its Relationship to Queer Intelligibility

2.1 Historical Progression: A 'Theory of Gay History'

D'Emilio's use of "family" and "family life" refers to the formation of the normative sense of the words, following the Judeo-Christian tradition of man as husband, woman as wife, and children as family unit. He also argues these family units were "self-sufficient,

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[22] D'Emilio 1993, 468

[23] D'Emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (eds.) Routledge: New York and London, 1993, p. 468.

independent, and patriarchal,"[24] before the development of industrial capitalism. By "heterosexual relations," he means "that technology of sex that results in natal reproduction." [25] Unfortunately, it must be taken into consideration that D'Emilio's definition of heterosexual intercourse does not allow for perceptions of "sexual intercourse" to exist outside of normatively familiar and codified heterosexual acts. By contrast, Henry Abelove offers an argument regarding the increase of a "particular kind of sexual expression" that he terms "cross-sex genital intercourse," during the late eighteenth century in England,[26] precisely to de-colonize the naturalization of normatively thought of sexual acts that D'Emilio takes for granted in his uncritical use of "heterosexual relations."

However, D'Emilio argues that "changes in the family are most directly linked to the appearance of a collective gay life." There was a shift in familial life, as he argues, from the family as an independent unit of production to the family as the primary unit for affective relationships and disconnected from the "public world of work and production."[27] This shift came about through the socialization of the production of consumer goods by capitalism. With the heterosexual family as the unit of production, procreation was necessary for continued labor and survival. However, as capitalism socialized production, it became possible to imagine "sex" devoid of its previous sole purpose of procreation. The family was projected as the ideological space of intimacy, sexual pleasure, and emotional private life. While the family was thus "stripped of one kind of economic justification," it gained others.

For instance, it was now firmly established within the private sphere of emotive significance, in structural opposition to "production (coded as male) and social reproduction

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[24] D'Emilio 1993, 469

[25] Pellegrini, Ann. "Consuming Lifestyle: Commodity Capitalism and Transformations in Gay Identity." In Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Queer globalizations : Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism.* New York : New York University Press, 2002, pp. 135-136.

[26] Abelove, Henry. "Some Speculations on the History of 'Sexual Intercourse' during the 'Long Eighteenth Century' in England. In Andrew Parker, et.al., eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities.* New York and London: Routledge, 1992, p. 337.

[27] D'Emilio 1993, 469

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(coded as female)."[28] This not only created the emergence of "a newly idealized middle-class heterosexual couple" and the focus of the family primarily as the site of consumption, but also allowed for the invention of homosexuality *and* heterosexuality to exist in binary opposition to one another.[29] Now it was no longer a necessity to stay confined to the "boundaries of the heterosexual nuclear family,"[30] because according to D'Emilio, men and women had a "social space" to be gay. [31] In *Language and Sexuality*, Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick locate this important historical shift in the mid-nineteenth century when 'heterosexual' was used as a labeling term not only of identity but also of perversion, if it was located outside of reproductive motives.[32] It was not until the rise of psychoanalysis that assuming an individual's "natural and obvious" sexual orientation as heterosexual became possible. Such assumptions also "make possible the construction and public display of *social identities* that are based on sexual orientation, such as 'gay man' and lesbian'."[33] Bryant Ragan elaborates this point in his historical tracing of sodomy and same-sex sexuality in France by focusing on the conceptual shift from sexual behavior (sodomy as sin), to sexual preference (homosexuality as identity).

Until the eighteenth century, constructions of homosexuality were not considered inherent in an individual nor did they challenge traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. However, the shift to same-sex sexual preference facilitated discourses of morality and signaled the idea that there were fundamental differences in those who engaged in same-sex sexual behavior. Ragan points out that, "Before the eighteenth century, it was conceivable that any man or woman might engage in the unnatural act of sodomy, as part of a

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[28] Pellegrini 2002, 136
[29] Pellegrini 2002, 137
[30] D'Emilio 1993, 474
[31] D'Emilio 1993, 470
[32] Cameron, Deborah; Kulick Don. *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003, p.21.
[33] Cameron and Kulick 2003, 21, emphasis mine

more generalized 'bisexual' behavior."[34] However, "this sexual model began to change" for reasons that "remain unclear."[35] What was once relegated as only behavior, now finds attachments to individual identities manifested both genetically (the person is "born" gay) and socially (the person is constructed as a gay man or lesbian to society). This concept has extended to contemporary culture as argued by Cameron and Kulick, who point out that, "a homosexual was not just a homosexual while having sex, but remains a homosexual in the office, watching TV, or playing with the children."[36] In addition to personal identity, sexual preference was (and continues to be) the way through which masculinity gets forged; men who desire other men are stigmatized as less manly, which both attests to the conflation of gender and sex in heteronormative culture as well as to the stigma of effeminacy that (the wrong kind of) gay men represent.

So, both homosexual and heterosexual non-procreative behaviors were tolerated until the eighteenth century, after which, in the beginnings of industrial capitalism, the latter got posited as the 'norm' (albeit "perverse"). This argument is in conflict with D'Emilio's logic, which asserts that it was capitalism which allowed for the "social space" for men and women "to be gay;" as Ragan's argument locates practicing sodomites during the 1700's whose subculture operated through codes of visibility articulated in "words and signs that only other men in their networks would recognize," as well as "visual connection" where men "tried to meet the eyes of other men who were standing alone."[37] However, following D'Emilio's argument, once procreation and sexual pleasure were separated and the latter permitted, waged labor provided the basis for individuals to "make a living" outside the previously restricted realm of family; "a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex," comes to be

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[34] Ragan, Bryant T. Jr. "The Enlightenment Confronts Homosexuality." In Jeffrey Marrick and Bryant T. Ragan (eds.), *Homosexuality in Modern France* (Oxford UP: New York and Oxford), 1996, p. 12.
[35] Ragan 1996, 12
[36] Cameron and Kulick 2003, 20
[37] Ragan 1996, 12-13

a structural possibility, it is seen as a "trait" divergent from "the majority."[38] And thus, the pathologizing discourses surrounding homosexuality (as inherent in one's nature) became "an ideological response to a new way of organizing one's personal life," and an attempt to control the deployment of sexuality by the middle-class.

Michel Foucault's, *History of Sexuality: Volume One*, explains that "the homosexual was now a species," and had become "a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life.."[39] This is helpful in understanding how mythical narratives of isolation and 'eternal homosexuality', as referred to in the first chapter, got perpetuated in the mid-twentieth century for political movements. This "species," argues Foucault, was an invention of the bourgeois class and "was the result of a complex interplay of culture and economics."[40] As D'Emilio explains, "the decisions of particular men and women to act on their erotic emotional preference for the same sex, along with the new consciousness that this preference made them different, led to the formation of an urban subculture of gay men and lesbians."[41] The shift away from the independent family unit was instrumental in bringing about an individual's notion of sexual identity, and subsequently the emergence of a larger gay collective.

The rise of this subculture was also mutually reinforced and enabled by the Second World War. The War made possible spaces where same-sex desires and relationships could flourish into "a complex and well-developed gay community" that had previously been "rudimentary, unstable, and difficult to find."[42] By disrupting traditional patterns of gender relations, where women and men were thrown into sex-segregated situations away from "towns and small cities," the War provided opportunities for individuals to explore their

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[38] D'Emilio 1993, 469

[39] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume One, An Introduction*. New York: Random House, 1978, p. 123.

[40] As quoted in Gluckman, Amy; Reed, Betsy. *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*. Routledge: New York and London, 1997, p. xxi.

[41] D'Emilio 1993, 471

[42] D'Emilio 1993, 472

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sexuality as well as places for gay people to "find others like themselves."[43] The Secord World War helped to foment a gay subculture that would later provide the historical backbone of the modern gay movement of the twentieth century.

Most importantly, D'Emilio's argumentation points out the inconsistency in capitalism, regarding the formation of the heterosexual family unit. The processes of the capitalist economy, while simultaneously reinforcing heterosexist and homophobic traditional family values, made possible the emergence of a gay identity and the parallel creation of larger urban, gay communities. D'Emilio recognizes that "ideologically, capitalism drives people into heterosexual families," while "materially, capitalism weakens the bonds that once kept families together so that members face a growing instability in the place they come to expect happiness and emotional security."[44] In taking away the economic functions of the family as an inherent necessity, capitalism commodified goods and services and socialized production which consequently relegated the family as the privatized source of emotional security and affection.

As D'Emilio argues, "capitalism knocked the material foundation away from family life" while "lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual feminists have become the scapegoats for the social instability of the system."[45] So paradoxically, the development of capitalism allowed for a modern gay identity to take root, while simultaneously reproducing conditions for the disenfranchisement of gay men and women. The logic of this contradiction also supports the mystifying strategies of certain marketing advertisements: on one hand the adverts put forth an image that relies on and calls attention to queer consumers' ability to "read between the lines" in order to receive its tempting message (and therefore spend money to buy the product), while on the other, companies continue to benefit from what Ann Pellegrini calls, "the profitable ignorance of heterosexuality," whose blindness to the dual

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[43] D'Emilio 1993, 472
[44] D'Emilio 1993, 473
[45] D'Emilio 1993, 473

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marking strategy allows for a "hermeneutics of plausible deniability" for both the company and straight consumer.[46] This is a point to which I will return in the next chapter.

2.2 Critiques of the 'Theory of Gay History'

D'Emilio's theory can be useful for the explanation of the emergence of a gay identity as a result of the operations of capitalism. However, it has significant oversights that serve to mask the experiences of many gays and lesbians and also neglect the processes intrinsic to the elaboration of lesbian identities as distinct from gay men. The "gay and lesbian identity" D'Emilio describes implicitly puts forth an image of the middle-class, white urban gay man as the dominant template for visible and recognizable homosexuality. He explains that "those individuals who recognized their same sex interest" and "were able to make a living through wage labor" could consequently "remain outside of heterosexual family relations and construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex."[47] However, "those individuals" are confined to only those who can afford to "make a living" as such, and therefore he not only neglects the experiences of economically disadvantaged individuals, but also disallows space for family units to be sites of connection and solidarity rather than disconnection and necessary migration.

Furthermore, it should be noted that D'Emilio's idea of a self-sufficient family is not a stable historical concept but rather an ideological formation of the bourgeoisie and its political discourse, as made evident by his neglect of 'other' family units (non-bourgeoisie). Also, the productive family unit on which his argument relies implies isolation from other self-sufficient units rather than a mutual reliance of cooperation and exchange for purposes of survival. Additionally, in describing World War II as productive of a "well-developed" (read: bourgeois) gay community contrary to the "difficult to find" (read: *not* white) community of

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[46] Pellegrini 2002, 138
[47] D'Emilio 1993, 470

the 1930's, D'Emilio's argument again offers a specific gay community that becomes recognizable as such through the unequal distribution of capital and the cultural visibility of a foregrounded dominant queer collective.

By using a heteronormative understanding of family life, at best he seems to reduce the experiences of "racialized or working-class queers" [48] against the backdrop of a dominant (i.e. middle-class, white male) queer culture, and at worst to render such "queers" invisible through the non-acknowledgment of their presence in an otherwise "visible" landscape of gay men and women in the world of capitalist consumption. [49] D'Emilio mentions that the "vast majority of blacks in the early twentieth century lived outside of the free labor economy," as well as many "women continued to grow and process food, make clothing, and engage in other kinds of domestic production." However, he goes on to point out that "the *white middle class* formed satisfying, mutually enhancing relationships," and the family "became the setting for a 'personal life,'" that was disconnected from labor production. [50] By omitting the "vast majority of blacks" and many women as well, D'Emilio understands the formation of a visible 'gay identity' and collectivity as primarily occupied by the white middle-class. He simultaneously argues that blacks and "working-class immigrants" have closely tied "kin networks and an ethic of family solidarity" which consequently "made gayness a difficult option to pursue," [51] and thus negates possibilities for "gayness" to find sanctuary within non-white family units; serving to solidify the myth of (biological) family sacrifice as non-negotiable in favor of migrating to and pursuing a larger urban gay "family" collective.

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[48] Pellegrini 2002, 139

[49] Here I intend to point out the lack of acknowledgment and space for gay identities that lay outside of visible bourgeois markers; I do not mean to speak for or offer opinions about such identities, nor do I mean to discount the experiences of gay subjectivities that do not fit into the dominant, homo-normative mold. On the contrary, I intend to argue and reveal how non-dominant patterns and visible signifiers that are in circulation in different (gay) communities as well as the *non*-desirability for identification with the dominant gay subject get neglected due to the foregrounding of a recognizable dominant queer culture reinforced by the normalizing processes of 'gaydar.'

[50] D'Emilio 1993, 469, emphasis mine

[51] D'Emilio 1993, 471

He asserts further that "gay men have traditionally been more visible than lesbians" and reinforces the assumption that visibility causally correlates with size; so that "the greater visibility of white gay men also reflected their larger numbers."[52] This oversight not only lacks an explanation of the differentiated experiences of gender and race during industrial capitalism that contributes to their uneven distribution, but also inherently discounts for the possibility of "large numbers" of gay men who are non-white as well as all lesbians. Additionally, by assuming relevance should imply size, D'Emilio's correlation inherently justifies a disregard of "minorities" and ideologically invests in precluding any critical insight to be gained from the "margins." Rosemary Hennessey more clearly emphasizes this point in arguing that, "the (in)visibility of class divisions continues to be spatially regulated," attesting to the visibility of some in privileged spaces (i.e. large numbers of white gay men) while exposing the denial of space (and thus visibility) to "minorities," thus foreclosing opportunities where the knowledge of 'others' could be gained.

As recognized by Gluckman and Reed in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*, "it was not the rise of wage labor per se but the breakdown of the sexual division of labor in the twentieth century, and the resulting increase in women's economic independence, that paved the way for modern lesbian life."[53] Furthermore, it should be pointed out that while "openly gay men and lesbians still face occupational segregation and discrimination,"[54] this may "hit lesbians and gay men of color more heavily," and that "sexism in the labor market hurts just lesbians [in comparison to gay men, in most cases]."[55] Although Gluckman and Reed highlight some of what D'Emilio's argument lacks, they also discount possibilities for both white and non-white gay and lesbian lifestyles to thrive outside of economic relations, within family units. By asserting that wage labor helped

[52] D'Emilio 1993, 471
[53] Gluckman and Reed 1997, xxii
[54] Pellegrini 2002, 137
[55] Gluckman and Reed 1997, xxii, brackets mine

to create an "escape route from heterosexual family life," the authors privilege some kinds of families (heterosexual, bourgeois) over 'others' (non-white, hetero- or homosexual).[56] The recognition of such assumptions serves as a constant reminder to always question *whose family, and whose family values* are being undermined by the paradox of capitalism.[57]

D'Emilio's language carries inherent exclusions that he fails to elaborate as central to and dependent upon the emergence of a *recognizable* gay identity. The description of gay men and lesbians "consolidate[es] an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences," as asserted by Rosemary Hennessey, engendered through the mutual processes of industrial and commodity capitalism.[58] By fashioning a gay history mainly highlighted by (specific) individual growth in capital, collective urban migration, and the corollary of that move, namely the abandonment of "heterosexual family life" and kinship, D'Emilio's logic foregrounds the growth of *a particular kind of* gay identity and subculture that grew and stabilized through industrial capitalism, and a kind of gay identity which is still maintained and flourishing in present-day consumer culture.

The assumptions in 'gaydar' are predicated on such a middle-class, white gay subjectivity that gets rendered visible by D'Emilio's account of the processes of capitalism. In offering an alternate history of homosexuality that eschews myths of isolation and marginalized despair, D'Emilio also reinforces a specific type of gay subject as the measurable norm. To illustrate this point further, Michael Warner argues that "the predominance of white, middle-class men in gay organizing, after all, is not simply the result of evil intent, personal discrimination, or willed exclusion."[59] Rather, there are institutionalized material and cultural conditions that allowed for D'Emilio's gay history to be written for a homo-normative gay subject. For instance, as Warner makes clear,

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[56] Pellegrini 2002, 139
[57] Pellegrini 2002, 137
[58] Hennessey 1995, 143
[59] Warner 1993, xvi

"institutions of queer culture have been dominated by those with capital," as the lesbian and gay cultural foundation has been "market-mediated," through "bars, discos, special services, newspapers, magazines, phone lines, resorts, urban commercial districts." I would like to argue that in so far as D'Emilio's critique falls in line with the dominant conception of the capitalist formation of the heteronormative family, his notion of gay takes for granted the disempowerment of women, the unequal alignment of race, class, gender, and sexuality throughout history, and the different experiences of practices of discrimination across many social spectrums, allowing for the emergence of a middle-class white man to be the primary earner of capital and thus move among the "market-mediated" cultural institutions that have come to dominate and define a specific gay lifestyle. Such a lifestyle is instrumental in contributing to the *visible* representation of dominant queer intelligibility, which in turn serves as the model for the assumptions in 'gaydar,' and is continuously fortified by the operations of commodification and consumerism.

D'Emilio articulates the ways in which a homo-normative gay subject has been foregrounded as *the* figure of a visible dominant queer culture, which helps to explain how 'other' non-normative queer individuals and communities remain veiled by the operations of capitalism. Here I understand 'homo-normative' to mean the practices of queer individuals and culture which function to uphold material and ideological heteronormative institutions. Also, in using 'non-normative' modes of queer subjectivities, I am referring to working-class queers, queer people of color, and any individual "passing" as straight (although the act of "passing" has its own politics which will be problematized in chapter six, section two).

According to D'Emilio, capitalism maintains a "constant interplay between exploitation and some measure of autonomy" for the individual with its ultimate goal always set as the expansion of capital; money and resources used for the purpose of acquiring more

money and resources.[60] This cycle of exploitative wealth is refashioned in consumer culture to falsely advocate for and project an image of equality and "acceptance" of non-heterosexuality by promoting *particular* "gay styles" and progressive economic and business policies. However, as observed by Danae Clark, such marketing tactics are "less indicative of a growing acceptance of homosexuality than of capitalism's appropriation of gay "styles" for mainstream audiences;" its shallow pretense of approval crumbles against its ever-increasing "quest for capital."[61] It is also important to note that the effects of capitalism are not restricted to the economic realm but rather, "the material processes of commodification pervade all structures."[62] Likewise, the variability in the meanings of "family and sexual identity have been articulated through racializing and patriarchal logics and not simply the logic of capital;"[63] the links in race, gender, and sexuality as they are manifested through 'gaydar' will be attended to in later sections.

Chapter 3: (Queer) Lifestyles and Identities

3.1 Exchanging Consumer Goods

I will now turn to illustrating *how* a dominant 'gay' style and subjectivity are made visible through the processes of commodification and work to support or challenge the assumptions in 'gaydar', thus exposing its underlying mechanisms and cultural anxieties. The processes that function to promote dominant queer intelligibility consist of several layers and should not be restricted to only materialistic understandings. It must be noted that my usage of 'production' and 'consumption' are "to be understood in relation to a cycle of appropriation dominated by commodification," specifically, the commodification and

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[60] D'Emilio 1993, 468
[61] Clark 1993, 195
[62] Hennessey 1995, 143
[63] Pellegrini 2002, 136

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appropriation of particular 'gay' styles in dominant culture.[64] This section will problematize how a subject becomes intelligible as gay, or as Linda Alcoff states, how to "make visible the practices of visibility itself," as well as trace the connection of gay visibility as a marketing strategy for mainstream consumer culture.

In *Consumer Culture*, Celia Lury notes that, "the emergence of consumer culture is characterized by its increasing stylization," and "the production, exchange and use of consumer goods is increasingly structured by the perceived *expressive or symbolic aspects* of those goods" and I would add, how such aspects interact with consumers.[65] Symbolic and expressive aspects of goods that make up a gay style signify an individual to be "gay" and therefore also part of a larger (imagined) community that is shown to exist precisely because of the widespread consumption and availability of a "gay style." The circuitous nature of this logic of self-evident visibility attests to capitalism's effect on the consumption of such styles: money used to make more money, just as goods that make up gay styles signify the existence of gay subjects. Capitalism is less interested in the product than in the money it circulates and multiplies in production; similarly, consumer culture is less interested in the gay subject than in the gay subjectivity that gets visibly constructed through expressive or symbolic aspects of commodified goods.

3.1.1 'Gaydar' and its Larger Implications

The idea of visibly recognizing an individual as gay as well as a larger gay community is based on practices of visibility that are exemplified in the assumptions of 'gaydar'. Whatever the symbolic and expressive aspects of goods are that (literally) fashion a 'gay style' at a specific moment and in a certain context, those goods get translated into that which represents gay visibility 'in general' and functions to make queers intelligible in those

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[64] Lury, Celia. *Consumer Culture*. Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1996, p. 93.
[65] Lury 1996, 80, emphasis mine

terms as normative; which in turn is indicative of instances when and why 'gaydar' "works" at certain times and in certain spaces. This attests to arbitrariness of the practices of 'gaydar' and its function in contemporary culture. Literature and scholarly research, as presented in chapter one, both overlook and fail to expose how the markers involved in one's so-called 'abilities' in reading 'gaydar' are produced and constructed by dominant hetero- and homo-normative culture, and how such productions are a result of particular historical and social formations in specific contexts. The success of being able to read a person's sexual orientation is dependent upon the politics of queer intelligibility, which is in turn shaped by commodification and the operations of consumer capitalism. Thus, the existence and success of 'gaydar' reflects cultural anxieties, contemporary trends, and historical circumstances.

In understanding what consists of a recognizable 'gay style' and what does not, it is necessary to address Michael Warner's earlier point explaining the visible predominance of certain gay subjects in mainstream queer movements. A particular kind of gay style is put forth by hetero- and homo-normative culture whose creation is inextricable from the operations of capitalism. So a specific kind of style gets commodified and that style is based on dominant gay culture, which as Warner makes clear, is made up of mostly "middle-class white men."[66] Therefore, those who are gay[67] (at certain times) but fail to conform to the style put forth by consumer capitalism and dominant culture through the processes of commodification, are not always recognized as gay. Rather, those individuals get rendered invisible or "pass" as straight, and consequently signify a moment where the perceptions of 'gaydar' necessarily fail. Contemporary examples of "readably gay" styles and images will expanded on in chapter four.

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[66] Warner 1993, xvii

[67] Here I do not mean to assert that an identity can be fully disclosed nor fully adopted, rather for the purposes of my argument and this thesis, I will refer to men and women "being" gay out of necessity to make a point, but do not wish to engage in or support specific identity-based discourses unless I expressly make clear my intentions to do so.

3.1.2 'The Gaze'

Common understandings and research on 'gaydar' suggest the presence of a quality that is inter-subjective rather than merely evaluative; this 'intuitive' quality contributes to what is off-putting about its reception in society. Descriptions of 'gaydar' include inherent "feelings" or "senses" that gauge an individual's sexuality, a subjective feature incapable of being pinned down, quantified, or measured. Brytant Ragan's historical tracing of homosexual men in eighteenth century France pointed to "visual connections" where men "tried to meet the eyes of other men,"[68] and Shelp's and Rule and Ambady's research studies recognize the "special intuition,"[69] implied in the practices of 'gaydar'.

It is my intention to reinvest 'gaydar' with positionality in order to show that its practical usages depend on the specificity of those involved in the act. What I term, 'the gaze', refers to the meeting of one's eyes with another's in mutual recognition of an imaginary shared gay history, community, and/or commonality. However, using 'the gaze' is always at once predicated on the knowledge of the other party; as it is only through the *mutual* recognition of eye contact that manifests this intuitive quality. Therefore 'the gaze' is subject to the same uncertainties as the material indicators in 'gaydar'. Also, despite its possible 'success' in queer recognition, 'the gaze' is problematic in the sense that both 'the gaze' itself or a person's sexual and/or gender identity can be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or misread. For instance, the androgynous dyke can be read as a gay man, straight man, or gay woman; depending upon the specificity of both the context and the audience. Furthermore, as it will be explained below, what is thought to be one's 'intuitive' choice is always already affected by one's larger socio-cultural field.

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[68] Ragan 1996, 12-13
[69] Shelp 2003, 2

3.2 (Life)Style Appropriations

Before going further, it is important to address my concept of 'style' in reference to gayness. Homosexual identity as gay 'lifestyle' will be used interchangeably throughout this text, and gay 'style' is taken to mean both sexual 'identity' as well as to refer to modern fashion trends by the processes of commodification. In order to make this (visibly) clearer as well as capture its multiple meanings, I use the expression gay '(life)style' to refer to both gay social identities as well as tastes in fashion, which the surrounding context of the argument will elucidate as referring to one or both. The use of 'lifestyle' also resonates with and is inextricable from bourgeoisie identity formations. For example, Rosemary Hennessey argues that, "the concept of identity as 'lifestyle' serves to manipulate a system of equivalences that structures the connection between the economic functions of the new middle class and their cultural formation."[70] With the shift from industrial capitalism to consumer capitalism, sexuality became a site of cultural consumption *in addition to* its persistence as a disciplinary model of power (as discussed above in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*). Thus, sexual 'lifestyle' indicators coded as gay began to be "picked up and sold as avant-garde trends,"[71] exemplifying both the commodification and promotion of a normalized gay identity.

Celia Lury further points out that "the emergence of lifestyle" is increasingly becoming "the definitive mode of consumption."[72] Using Lury's points I argue that there is an effort and curious phenomenon in late modernity and consumer culture to attempt to buy, shed, adopt, and discard (gay) identities and lifestyles through commodified goods labeled 'queer'. This implies how easily the visibility of gay identities gets fetishized for the purpose of fashioning, as Hennessey argues, "new urban identities," which subsequently "conceal the

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[70] Hennessey 1995, 165
[71] Pellegrini 2002, 141
[72] Lury 1996, 80

social relations" such new identities depend on; this point will be further explained in [73]

Hennessey understands "lifestyle" as "a more porous conception of the self as a 'fashioned' identity," and acknowledges how its "indicators of individuality and style can be acquired with *a few purchases*,"[74] further implying the ease to which identities can be adopted through visible style markers.

According to Mike Featherstone, as quoted in Lury's text, "adopting a lifestyle" for 'identity' is meant to signal the tendency in consumerism according to which identity becomes "a project" where people "display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle."[75] This is linked to an individual's particular tastes, which are influenced by and is seen inextricable from underlying social factors that the consumer is most likely unaware of, but testifies to the fact that "practices of consumption are not merely a matter of economic exchange."[76] For instance, individuals "*borrow* from the general cultural repertoires supplied to them by the society in which they live, relying on general definitions of valued traits that take on a rule-like status."[77] Hennessey argues that, "while the coherent individual has not been displaced, increasingly new urban lifestyles promise a de-centering of identity by way of consumer practices;" such practices "announce that styles of life can be purchased in clothes, leisure activities, household items, and bodily dispositions."[78] There are several important points to be discussed here.

The first is that traits labeled as 'gay' reflect a homo-normative definition of a gay subjectivity, serving to conceal 'other' gay styles that are not in dominant circulation (and

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[73] Hennessey 1995, 146
[74] Hennessey 1995, 165, emphasis mine
[75] Lury 1996, 100
[76] Hennessey 1995, 166
[77] Lury 1996, 108, emphasis mine
[78] Hennessey 1995, 166

perhaps do not desire to be in dominant circulation). Second, an individual's "tastes" indicate and are affected by broader class implications and experiences. Using Bourdieu's renowned research into hierarchical economic distinctions suggests that "the distinctive tastes of members of the dominant class act as status markers and facilitate integration into this group."[79] This supports the predominance and popularity of specific commodities (which act as "status markers" for gay and straight communities) that contribute to dominant queer intelligibility, and which consequently confuse the success of 'gaydar' (when the appearance of a 'straight' person signifies gay (life)style codes). Connections between markers of class and individual tastes will be expanded on later with references to Bourdieu's theory of social positioning.

Third, although there are instances where Featherstone's assertions do well to articulate the phenomenon of appropriating and "borrowing" gay identities, by not critically reflecting on the effects or implications of this trend, his argument is complicit in serving to reduce the lived experiences of gay people to a commodifiable entity available to wear or remove as one pleases (which is also how gay (life)styles are marketed in mainstream culture to straight audiences). Ann Pellegrini demonstrates this point by stressing that, "in the discourse of heteronormativity, gays have lifestyles, everyone else (an everyone else that need not be further identified because we know who and what we are) has lives."[80] Although Hennessey also indicates the ability to acquire a lifestyle through "a few purchases," it is only through performing its depth that a personal identity (and a 'life') can get constructed.

It is important to point out that my usage of '(life)style' does not intend to be reductive (as the politics of identity choice and sexual behavior/preference have been shown to be incredibly complex), but rather serves to acknowledge anxieties surrounding the fragility and construction of normative identity categories, especially as inseparable from

[79] Lury 1996, 109
[80] Pellegrini 2002, 142

consumer capitalism. And as mentioned earlier, it is important to stress that I do not intend to potentially victimize non-normative modes of queer intelligibility, nor do I mean to attach value to either normative or non-normative gay subjectivities. Instead, I mean to call attention to the complex processes of visibility and acknowledge the widespread anxieties entangled within issues of recognition.

Chapter 4: 'Gaydar' and Commodification

4.1 Chasing Gay Dollars

"Vision is useful in perpetrating the illusion of transparent cognition."

-Linda Martin Alcoff[81]

Here I will examine the ways in which heterosexual culture appropriates queer styles for mainstream audiences, and the politics of conscious and unconscious market advertising to heterosexuals, gay women, and gay men. The development of consumer capitalism has heralded a "new willingness of some companies to chase gay dollars."[82] However, as mentioned above, Danae Clark asserts that this is less indicative of a growing acceptance of homosexuality than it is a realization of a broadly untapped consumer market; a market occupied by dominant queer culture. As Gluckman and Reed argue, "the image of the gay community as a prosperous elite is now so prevalent as to be politically dangerous [to antigay campaigns]."[83] They go on to mention that "corporations have calculated that the benefits of pitching to gay and lesbian consumers may outweigh the risks of enraging conservative groups and their constituents."[84] Gay men and women now grace the covers of popular (gay and straight) magazines, façades of clothing stores, and highway billboard signs. And as Pellegrini makes clear, "more and more companies have developed ad campaigns that

[81] Alcoff 2006, 197
[82] Pellegrini 2002, 139
[83] Gluckman and Reed 1997, xii
[84] Pellegrini 2002, 139

represent *readably gay or lesbian images*."[85] This statement warrants critique in that Pellegrini assumes the transparency of "readable" gay and lesbian images without problematizing how images become readable as such, thus taking for granted the politics of queer intelligibility and the influence of dominate visible images. However she does point out that, "companies who do not serve a conservative, family-oriented constituency, are more likely to reach out to and for gay dollars;"[86] which supports the praise and success of so-called "risks" taken by Absolut Vodka (explained below), who reaches out to gay consumers, versus the conventional (conservative) approaches upheld by Proctor and Gamble or Wal-Mart.

4.2 Dual Marketing and the (Un)Conscious Appropriations of Gay Styles

In the late twentieth century there was a (visible) shift in marketing strategies from companies' hesitancy and refusal to speak to homosexual consumers to an implicit embrace of gay audiences through strategic means. This shift, "especially for gay men," sought to reach gay consumers through "discreet means" by using a dual marketing approach that would "speak to the homosexual consumer in a way that the straight consumer will not notice."[87] By using this 'coded behavior' advertisers capitalized on appealing to gay audiences through mutual recognition that the product was gay-friendly or modeled off of gay styles; as well as to heterosexual audiences, through what Pellegrini has called, "the profitable ignorance of heterosexuality," which describes straight consumers *lack* of recognition of gay codes. This strategy allows for a "hermeneutics of plausible deniability," so that the company will have the power of denial if openly questioned about its target audience and the straight consumer will able to deny any conscious attempts to 'dress gay'.[88]

[85] Pellegrini 2002, 138, emphasis mine
[86] Pellegrini 2002, 139
[87] Clark 1993, 187
[88] Pellegrini 2002, 138

Plausible deniability is usually employed when a gay (life)style is "worn" unconsciously by heterosexuals or homosexuals. If this is the case, it is telling of several factors. First, the success of dual marketing strategies to appropriate styles coded as gay (which are coded as such through processes of capitalism) to be consumed by mainstream culture. Second, of exposing both the wish for a continuity between the body and an identity and the subsequent anxiety that follows if they do not remain parallel and stable. This anxious desire stems from "heteronormativity's insistence that sex equals gender,"[89] and that the latter must follow from the former. Shane Phelan further explains the tendency to conflate normative understandings of gender (in terms of masculinity and femininity) with assumptions about sexual orientation in her essay, "(Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics." She recognizes that what mainstream culture sees as "signs of lesbianism [homosexuality or queerness] were signs of nonconformity to sexist standards of femininity, [masculinity, and constructions of normative gender presentations]."[90] This is elaborated on by Christine Delphy in, "Rethinking Sex and Gender," where she attempts to displace femininity as female and masculinity as male. By arguing for sex and gender as independent of each other, gender can be unhinged from its necessity to follow from sex. Delphy argues that sex should be understood as a sign and symbolic, attempting to dislocate it from connotations of 'naturalness',[91] which allow space for the body to be incongruous to an identity. And finally, it illustrates an instance where 'gaydar' may work in so far as a gay man or woman is read as having a 'gay style' (one can still be intelligible as gay precisely because of one's non-heteronormative style); or an instance where 'gaydar' may *not* work, if a straight man or woman is read 'wrongly' as having a gay style.

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[89] Hennessey 1995, 151

[90] Phelan, Shane. "(Be)Coming Out: Lesbian Identity and Politics." *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Theorizing Lesbian Experience (Summer, 1993), p. 774.

[91] Delphy, Christine. "Rethinking Sex and Gender." In Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (eds.) *Gender: A Sociological Reader*. Routledge, 2002, p. 54.

Although I am trying to make clear that the "reader/being read" dichotomy in the mechanisms of 'gaydar' are often incongruous, it is important to realize that heterosexuality is considered to be the norm in dominant culture and therefore an individual is almost always assumed to be straight until 'proven' otherwise; which is when 'gaydar' is called upon to make the necessary distinctions. As Judith Butler makes clear in her essay, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," the act of 'coming out' and "making visible one's homosexuality,"[92] is a process one can never wholly achieve. According to Butler, "no homosexual is ever entirely 'out' because identity, always undermined by the disruptive operations of the unconscious and of signification, can never be fully disclosed."[93] Thus a gay subject comes to be continuously caught in the process of "outing" oneself; a process which cannot be extracted from the politics of queer intelligibility and is shaped by consumer capitalism, the commodification of homo-normative styles, and the presuppositions embedded in contemporary usages of 'gaydar'.

4.3 A Contemporary Example of 'Gay Window Advertising'

Marketing strategies may not always refer to appearance but instead aim to specifically address a gay audience. For example, Absolut Vodka is a well-known "progressive" company who supports gay issues and gay friendly policies. In a recent news release the company stated, "Absolut challenges the status quo by presenting a bold and optimistic worldview that speaks directly to gay men and women."[94] They went on to launch an ad campaign specifically directed at gay men with one of their billboards bearing an eight-inch ruler, over which was written: *In an Absolut World*; leaving the sentence open for the (gay male) consumer to finish: *In an Absolut World*…all gay men have eight-inch dicks. The company commented that the ad takes, "a

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[92] Hennessey 1995, 150
[93] As quoted in Hennessy 1995, 150
[94] http://www.worldnetdaily.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=61039

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humorous look at gay men and their fascination with perfect, eight-inch 'member' measurements."[95] However the underlying assumptions of the advert reinforce images of male homosexuality as saturated in promiscuity which does little to "challenge" the status quo in homosexual stereotypes. Furthermore, although Absolut is praised for their progressive campaigns and policies, Clark and Pellegrini's points still ring true: this is less indicative of a growing acceptance of homosexuality than of the commodification of gay (life)styles by mainstream culture for the ever-increasing quest for capital.

Calvin Klein, Benetton, and the GAP are well-known corporations whose advertisements often speak to or include dominant gay audiences. The dual marketing strategy discussed above, by which advertisers try to appeal to gay consumers without straight consumers realizing, is often referred to as "gay window advertising,"[97] where the subtextual elements of the ad correspond to *dominant* (white, middle-upper class) experiences with or representations of gay and lesbian cultures. These companies have capitalized on "the

[95] http://www.worldnetdaily.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=61039
[96] GLAAD Advertising Media Program:
http://www.commercialcloset.org/common/adlibrary/adprintdetails.cfm?QID=3701&ClientID=11064
[97] Clark 1993, 188

ability of gay idols to set trends for straight shoppers;"[98] this strategy both addresses gay

consumers as well as appropriates a gay (life)style, usually without acknowledgment of this

appropriation. Calvin Klein also engaged in the use of "plausible deniability" to refute

accusations of purposefully appealing to gays. As quoted in Clark's article, Calvin Klein

asserted, "We try to appeal, period. With healthy, beautiful people. If there's an awareness in

that community of health and grooming, they'll respond to the ads."[99] Not only does this

statement directly speak to dominant queer culture (addressed as "*that* community"), it also

exposes the class distinctions that serve to underpin the links in taste and class and their

relationship to the formation of a(n exclusive) community. For instance, codes of dominant

queer intelligibility are more likely to be circulated and used by "chic brand names" and

relatively "upscale" companies such as "Bloomingdale's or Neiman Marcus as opposed to K-

Mart,"[100] as Hennessey points out. Class distinctions and the subsequent social relations

inherent in the production of commodified goods will be discussed below.

Chapter 5: Consumption and Exploitation

5.1 Invisibility and Exclusions

"Perception - a historically produced cultural knowledge - is inseparable from the

social relationships of labor and power commodity capitalism is premised on."

-Rosemary Hennessey[101]

Consumer culture is deeply embedded in systems of meanings whereby the

commodity comes to have several levels of significance. Just as the operations of capitalism

"pervade all structures," the commodity comes to have economic as well as cultural

significance. Lury summarizes Arjun Appadurai's theory that, "the ways in which goods

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[98] Gluckman and Reed 1997, 5
[99] Clark 1993, 188, emphasis mine
[100] Hennessey 1995, 166
[101] Hennessey, Rosemary. Hennessey, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism.*
Routledge: New York and London, 2000, p. 96.

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create social identity [i.e. 'lifestyle']" and the "ways in which they act as carriers of interpersonal influence," gain importance in material culture and come to signify the "social lives" of individuals who purchase/consume the goods.[102] Thus, objects come to have "meaning and status"[103] as they circulate in everyday culture and marketing strategies are complicit in both producing those meanings and being affected by them. As Hennessey points out, "advertising permeates the fabric of daily life with an infinity of visual spectacles, codes, signs, and information bits;" these work to make 'style' an "increasingly crucial marker of social value and identity" through cultural forms.[104] So a 'gay' style can become a social identity [gay (life)style] through its construction in commodity culture, which has been shown to be dominated by a homo-normative gay subjectivity.

The politics of queer intelligibility in consumer capitalism is defined by exclusions. Goods are used to make distinctions between groups of individuals, and as asserted by Bourdeiu, these consumption practices can be understood as "a struggle over social positioning." An individual's preferred "lifestyle" is indicative of (real or desired) class positioning which is not always "the result of individualistic choices, but is socially patterned."[105] I have mentioned Bourdeiu's argument above that "tastes" help reveal connections to wider social and class implications. He claims that "individuals struggle to improve their social position by manipulating the cultural representation of their situation in the social field."[106] Hennessey supports this claim by arguing that, "hyperconsumption promoted by appeals to lifestyle are class specific," and "middle-class consumers scrambled to shore up symbolic capital through stylized marks of distinction."[107] This can be applied to help explain the growing popularity of and investment in 'gay styles' for both mainstream

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[102] Lury 1996, 19
[103] Lury 1996, 20
[104] Hennessey 1995, 165
[105] Lury 1996, 83
[106] Lury 1996, 83
[107] Hennessey 1995, 166

heterosexual and homosexual audiences, in that 'gay styles' are sought in order to project images of higher or proper social class positioning.

There is another layer of exclusion within the politics of queer visibility that hinges more centrally upon exploitation and differs from Appadurai's theory of objects having "social lives," which pertains more to the consumer of a particular good. Rather, Hennessey makes clear the exploitative ways in which objects are consumed that function to render invisible the social relations *of the object's production*; this calls attention to the labor that went into the production of the object rather than its consumer. She illustrates this point by recognizing the ways in which certain "sexual identities *we can see* are systemically organized."[108] For instance, she reveals that "the invisible social relations" of exploitative labor production perpetrated by the "class-specific 'bourgeois homosexual/queer imaginary'"[109] maintains the relegation of certain populations to the margins (i.e. non-white, working-class).

Hennessey explicates this point further in her discussion of Marx's "commodity fetishism," which explains that when a "commodity is fetishized" (i.e. the style of bourgeois queer subjectivities), "the labor that has gone into its production is rendered invisible."[110] Commodity fetishism is the idea, or rather "the illusion, that value resides in objects rather than in the social relations between individuals and objects."[111] So, the commodity gets appropriated and 'worn' with "a few purchases" by the mainstream consumer while its "historicity of visibility" [the invisible labor(er)] remains concealed in the object and neglected by the operations of capitalism. The commodification of dominant queer subjectivities relies on "the exploitation of human labor," and only makes visible the "process of image-making" when the commodity is "dealt with merely as a matter of signification,

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[108] Hennessey 1995, 177, emphasis mine
[109] Hennessey 1995, 176
[110] Hennessey 1995, 162
[111] Hennessey 1995, 161-162

meaning, or identities."[112] The following chapter will speak about the politics of gay and

lesbian intelligibility and its links to the commodification of identity-regulated visibility.

5.2 'Gaydar' and Privileging the 'Seeable'

One's (in)visibility and marginalization is linked to what Hennessey differentiates as

"visible" versus "seeable." 'Visibility' has attachments to historical effects (as mentioned in

the concept of Marx's "commodity fetishism") where the value of the commodity actually

resides in the social relations between individual and object rather than in objects themselves.

In *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, Hennessey explains that

> When commodity fetishism erases the material basis of value, it does so by attaching itself
> to the products of labor as soon as they are produced. In the process, a distinction is
> created between what is visible and what is seeable. What seems the empirical reality of a
> commodity like a sneaker is not seeable in itself; it only becomes seeable because of the
> historically available ways of seeing we bring to knowing this thing.[113]

Because of our historically learned modes of perception, we see the value of "a sneaker," as a

material object but we do not understand the social relations of labor that have gone into its

production. Therefore, the object's "historicity of visibility" remains unseen. To exemplify

her point, Hennessey explains that, "gay-friendly corporations like Levi-Strauss promote gay

window-dressing strategies that boast of their progressive corporate policies for lesbians and

gays," but "Levi-Strauss's workers in the sweatshops of Saipan, who earn as little as $2.15 an

hour, remain largely invisible."[114] Thus, she concludes that, "Displaying the gay-friendly

policies of 'progressive' US corporations often deflects attention from the exploitative

international division of labor they depend on in the interest of the company's bottom line –

profits."[115] This logic can be related to my analysis of Calvin Klein, Benetton, the GAP, and

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[112] Hennessey 1995, 162

[113] Hennessey, Rosemary. Hennessey, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism.*
    Routledge: New York and London, 2000, p. 96.

[114] Hennessey 1995, 174

[115] Hennessey 1995, 174-175: Hennessey makes a valid and significant point here, although it should be noted
that stringing together local and global logics should be done so with critical reflection and care, as it may result
in the enforcement of Western ideals on Eastern subjects and enter into a process of 'othering' that one is
attempting to critique.

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many other companies purporting to advertise their "progressive" policies and politics while engaging in exploitation of both gay (life)styles and labor production.[116]

In a more colloquial sense, the "seeable" can be understood as what 'gaydar' brings to the forefront when judging one's identity based simply in matters of signification and "historically produced cultural knowledge." So, gay *seeability* integrates gay people into a marketing niche that profits consumer capitalism economically as well as culturally through its class-regulated visibility. Gay subjects get abstracted away from social and cultural relations when homo-normative gay styles are foregrounded and appropriated by heterosexual mainstream consumers which simultaneously work to alienate the labor that produced the dominant gay (life)styles. Thus, specific normalizing modes of 'seeing' (the gay subject) erase the 'visibility' of both non-dominant gay subjectivities and exploitative labor practices, and may also serve to erase the visibility of other identity markers; for as Alcoff argues, "what cannot be made totally visible and clear may disappear altogether from consciousness."[117] Due to the lack of intelligibility of certain queer populations, the visible presence of such populations gets rendered invisible in certain privileged spaces. However, it is important to note that Hennessey's argument disallows space for other patterns of gay visibility to exist as well as implicitly assumes that queer identification in mainstream culture is always already desired.

5.3 Queer Visibility in Mainstream Culture

In addition to the consumption of gay identities as "avant-garde trends" throughout capitalist history, the success of modern gay civil rights struggles (beginning in "market-mediated" venues and therefore dominated by those with capital) further served to foreground a normalized gay (life)style as a desirable image. Likewise, the symbolic or expressive

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[116] However, I do not mean to present the implication that all companies who proclaim their open-mindedness to queer politics and culture also necessarily engage in unfair modes of labor production.
[117] Alcoff 2006, 198

aspects of the goods that contribute to the construction and maintenance of this (life)style are legitimized as "representing what it means to be 'what it is right to be'," which delineates ways it is "right" (read: tolerated) to be *visibly* gay, using what is not visible as symbolic enough of what to avoid or never recognize at all. However, this is a dual-sided argument in that the acceptance and popularity of gay (life)styles concomitantly receives a homophobic backlash in mainstream culture due to anxieties and beliefs in the conflation of femininity and masculinity with femaleness and maleness. When a recognizable gay style is "worn" consciously by lesbians or gay men, it is an instance when groups of individuals are aware that the usage of these goods will distinguish them as gay (when the codes are read and picked up on). Actively choosing to be intelligible may be used for political reasons, and also as a visual marker for other gay people for the purposes of attracting a partner, or to be recognized as part of a particular community.

Though it is important to note that not all lesbians and gay men consciously decide to "wear" styles coded as gay; rather an individual's "tastes" in goods and choices in lifestyle can be read as 'gay' but may not be done explicitly for the purposes of disclosing his or her sexual orientation. An explanation for this is twofold. First, the individual may still be visibly recognized as gay, yet this is due to the individual's failure to participate in the normative expectations of 'proper' gender codes and lifestyle in dominant culture (i.e. feminine dress/disposition for a 'woman' and masculine for a 'man'). Second, as asserted by Bourdieu, individual lifestyle tastes are always influenced and affected by larger social patterns; the politics of queer intelligibility are not merely materialistic. As Hennessey emphasizes, "the intensified integration of cultural and commodity production under late capitalism by way of the rapid flow of images and signs that saturate myriad everyday activities continuously work and rework desires by inviting them to take the forms dictated by the commodity market."[118]

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[118] Hennessey 1995, 165

So, with the increasing visibility and popularity of *a particular kind of* gay (life)style (made possible through the processes of capitalism, the successes of modern gay rights movements, and the subsequent commodification and consumption of goods coded as gay), many gay people look and act a certain way although remain unaware of the underlying operations that have affected their particular life'style' choices and behaviors.

When a style acknowledged to be gay is appropriated by heterosexuals it serves to illustrate the exploitation of gay (life)styles by heterosexual culture. Due to the historical circumstances surrounding theories of gay histories and the attachment and anxiety around heteronormative culture's tendency to conflate gender and sexuality, some "symbolic and expressive aspects" that make up particular goods coded as gay have been more stable than the shifting nature of fashion and social trends suggest. For example, several colors have been systematically coded as "female" and "feminine" by heteronormative culture (such as pink or solid, light colors), and subsequently represent passivity and gentility (which is also exemplary of [hetero]sexism). Gay men have long been associated with and stigmatized by feminine stereotypes and thus such colors are often used to signify (an undesirable) sexual orientation. Often, such representative goods are more revealing of assumed heterosexist norms rather than shifting trends. As explained above and to be expanded on below, the desirability and recognition of specific markers come to be linked to expressions of sexual orientation and (life)style identity.

5.3.1 A Contemporary Example of Gay (Life)Style Appropriation

Rosemary Hennessey quotes an article from *Esquire* Magazine that boasts, "Just about everyone dresses a little gay these days...it is now a marketing given that gay sensibility sells to both gay and straight."[119] Popular hip hop artist Kanye West exemplifies this point as well as the flaws in 'gaydar' and the normalizing tendency to conflate gender and sexuality.

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[119] Hennessey 1995, 168

West is universally known for his fashion sense and was in attendance at Paris fashion week the past several years. He is often "accused" of being gay due to his stylistic choices (and rumors circulate that he is in fact gay). West vehemently denies these rumors and also defends his sense of style. In a February 2009 interview with MTV, West stated

> "Dressing gay" you can't dress like ... Your dress don't give away whether or not you like a man. Think about actors that straight dress up like a woman or something like that. People wanna label me and throw that on me all the time, but I'm so secure with my manhood. And that's the reason why I can go to Paris, why I can have conversations with people who are blatantly gay.[120]

Here he measures a normative idea of masculinity or 'manliness' against assumptions about sexual orientation. The stereotypical "markers of machismo"[121] are absent when dealing with styles coded as gay, which causes West to verbally insist that he is no less of a 'man'. Because 'homosexual' is often equated with gender-inappropriate or gender-deviant speech, behavior, and lifestyle, West must reconcile his fashion and lifestyle choices against presumptions of homosexuality. This is exemplary of the way in which same-sex sexual preference continues to profoundly influence and construct normative notions of masculinity, as discussed earlier in Ragan's text. The fact that West insists he is "secure with his manhood" allows him to dress in 'recognizably' gay styles and attend fashion events.

The popularity of gay styles, especially when modeled on celebrity bodies, attests to "the appropriation of gay cultural codes in the cosmopolitan revamping of gender" which serves to "display the arbitrariness of bourgeois patriarchy's gender system," and its reliance on constructed gender norms of intelligibility. West further differentiates himself from, "people who are *blatantly* gay" (with whom he is able to converse precisely because of his self-acknowledged level of machismo), but never explains what is required to fall into this undesirable "blatant" category, or rather what should be avoided. Instead his language assumes the audience's natural understanding of, and anxiety over, bodies considered to be "blatantly gay" by whom he necessarily refuses to specifically articulate: hypervisible,

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[120] Reid, Shaheem. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1604620/20090209/west_kanye.jhtml
[121] Hennessey 1995, 169

effeminate, 'unmanly' and therefore often undesirable, gay men in mainstream heterosexual society.
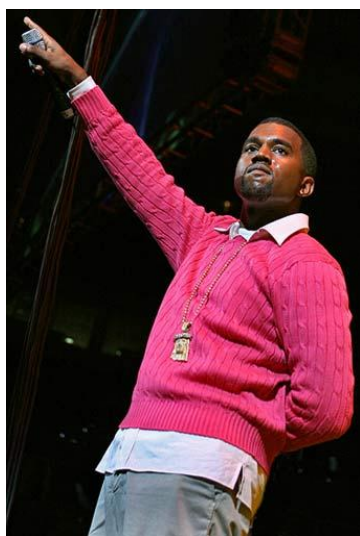
Kanye West   Paris: Kanye in center with briefcase

Later in the interview West is asked about a picture from Paris fashion week (above) that was taken with him and several others dressed in "a lot of colors."[123] He responded by referring to the popular gay signifier, the rainbow, and said

> Man I think as straight men we need to take the rainbow back because it's fresh. It looks fresh. I just think that because stereotypically gay people got such good like style that they were smart enough to take a fresh-ass logo like the rainbow and say that it's gonna be theirs. But I was like "Man I think we need to have the rainbow" — the idea of colors , life and colors and stuff, I mean how is that a gay thing?[124]

West equates "good style" with "stereotypical gay people" (read: white, affluent/middle-class mostly men). However, it seems as if a desirable style coded as gay can be separated from an undesirable "blatantly gay" lifestyle by differentiating between a straight versus gay sexual orientation, which once again forges masculinity through sexual preference.

He also points out an appropriation of the rainbow by gay people and expresses a wish to "take" it back (if it was even "theirs" to begin with?[125]). He is confused (and

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[122] Rolling Stone. http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/kanyewest/photos/collection/photo/72
[123] Reid, Shaheem. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1604620/20090209/west_kanye.jhtml
[124] Reid, Shaheem. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1604620/20090209/west_kanye.jhtml
[125] Fun Fact: In 1978, Gilbert Baker of San Francisco designed and made a flag with six stripes representing the six colors of the rainbow as a symbol of gay and lesbian community pride. Slowly the flag took hold, and today

frustrated) as to why bright colors must be coded as symbolically gay, and feels compelled to constantly assert his masculinity if he is to wear such styles. West is willing to purchase a trendy gay style, symbolizing its desirability but distancing himself with its significations. His adoption of gay (life)style signifiers can be interpreted as exploitative and also homophobic, in that he uses such style to emphasize his comfort with straight sexuality, thus exposing an implicit anxiety and discomfort about 'being', or being read as, gay. Similar to the paradox of capitalism, whereby its operations allowed for the emergence of a modern gay identity while also reproducing conditions for the disenfranchisement of gay men and women; West practices a more implicit homophobia by emphasizing his masculine non-homosexuality and distance from gayness, while simultaneously contributing to the popularity of gay styles. Despite whether the style is embraced as gay or defended as 'manly', profits are still made from both gay and straight dollars due to the commodification of gay (life)styles.

5.3.2 Labels and Acknowledgments

In my analysis, I do not mean to imply that all appropriations of 'gay styles' must also be exploitative and homophobic, rather, there are many spaces where appropriation can be considered political and subversive. My purpose here is to expose issues of visibility as always already embedded within a certain politics and hierarchy; and more importantly, the politics of queer intelligibility as more intricately tied to the processes of capitalism and consumption. Pellegrini makes an important point that, "rather than nostalgically yearning for lesbian and gay identities unmarked by commodity capitalism, what if we acknowledged that lesbian and gay identities have always been in some way marked by capitalism, and so too

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it is recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers, and is flown in lesbian and gay pride marches worldwide.
The Rainbow Flag by Steven W. Anderson appeared in *GAZE Magazine (Minneapolis), #191,* 28 May 1993, p 25.

have heterosexual identities (though we rarely speak of heterosexuality as any identity as all)?" Pellegrini recognizes that because heterosexuality is taken as the norm in dominant culture[126], it is often left out of discourses on 'identity' and therefore its tie to commodity capitalism often goes unacknowledged as well.

As discussed earlier, Cameron and Kulick reveal that 'heterosexual' was also used as a labeling term of identity coined in the mid-nineteenth century and "originally denoted as a perversion – having sex with someone of the other gender for pleasure rather than in order to reproduce."[127] It functioned as the antonym of 'homosexual', but subsequently "lost its status as a perversion" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as this shift "reflected the influence of arguments made by Freud and others to the effect that having sex for pleasure is not abnormal."[128] So while "heterosexuality is not an original or pure identity," as asserted by Diana Fuss in Hennessey's text, "its coherence is only secured by at once calling attention to and disavowing its abject, interiorized, and ghostly other, homosexuality."[129] Pellegrini's recognition acknowledges the usual oversight of this significant point.

Chapter 6: Lesbian Subjectivities and Consumer Culture

6.1 Marketing the 'Lesbian' Commodity

My argument here will function to reveal how dominant gay 'styles' are manifested in visual codes and signifiers, which subsequently render non-normative queers invisible and unacknowledged[130]. To further explain my points, it is important to complexify the politics of gay female styles, which was not sufficiently fleshed out in D'Emilio's text. The intricacies of differing lesbian styles carry many significations within lesbian and heterosexual cultures.

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[126] As pointed out by Adrienne Rich in her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (eds.) Routledge: New York and London, 1993, p. 227-254.

[127] Cameron and Kulick 2003, 21

[128] Cameron and Kulick 2003, 21

[129] Hennessey 1995, 155

[130] But I do not mean to imply that non-dominant queers *wish* to be either visible or acknowledged.

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However, I do not mean to position all women or lesbians as the same in relation to one another, doing so would only serve to mystify the disproportionate effects carried by identity markers in heteropatriarchy. My analysis below will discuss the politics of lesbian subjectivities that get foregrounded in mainstream culture and shown to be inseparable from the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

D'Emilio's argument hinged on a discourse relying on the phrase, 'gays and lesbians,' with the intent of including lesbian experiences that were and still are so often rendered invisible or even phantasmic[131] in hetero- and homo-normative narratives. However, this language is problematic in that it actually serves to conflate gay male and gay female lives as well as present a lesbian subject as monolithic and as the constant companion to gay men. This not only puts forth an image of 'gays and lesbians' as a bounded entity (more like 'gaysandlesbians'[132]); it also serves to reinforce mythical narratives of shared (and imagined) histories and commonalities among gay communities themselves. It is my intention here to use the politics of visibility as a nexus to discuss the ways in which lesbian subjectivities in particular get constructed and made intelligible in both mainstream culture and within lesbian subcultures, and to reveal how dominant lesbian subjectivities function in and are continuously being constituted and defined by their present-day usages.

As I have pointed out above, D'Emilio's account of the different experiences of women and men throughout history lacked in articulating the ways in which women, and in particular gay women, have been disenfranchised and the ways in which lesbians have formed communities and identities differently than gay men. From a contemporary consumer perspective, Clark's "Commodity Lesbianism," demonstrates how marketing strategies and advertisement campaigns take advantage of a homo-normative gay subjectivity for the

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[131]Castle, Terry. The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture. Columbia University Press: New York, 1993.
[132] This is a reference to Cynthia Enloe's useful phrase/framing "womenandchildren;" originally from "Womenandchildren: making feminist sense of the Persian Gulf Crisis," *The Village Voice* (1990).

purpose of bringing in both gay and straight dollars. Such strategies of consumption are intertwined with the politics of queer intelligibility. Clark examines "the role of the lesbian spectator as consuming subject,"[133] as well as the relationship of lesbians to consumer culture through representations of (dominant) lesbianism.

In order for companies to profit off of gay styles and gay dollars, it is crucial to have a visible market to appeal to as well as for that market to be appealing. Clark notices that, "for several historical reasons, lesbians have not been easily identifiable as a social group," nor have lesbians been "economically powerful." For advertisers to develop and attend to a consumer group, that group must be "(1) identifiable, (2) accessible, (3) measurable, and (4) profitable."[134] Because lesbians (and all gay people) exist across determinants of race, class, ethnicity, and many other identity-carrying significations, often identifying more strongly with one or more of those determinants, lesbians are more difficult to both identify and access. And therefore, they cannot be measured (as opposed to the plethora of attempts to 'measure' the quantity of gay men, i.e. Kinsey and others[135]) or made profitable.

However, with the shift to dual marketing strategies in the twentieth century and companies specifically directing their advertisements to gay consumers, "gay" has become "a warmer if not a hot commodity,"[136] especially the visibility given to a particular kind of lesbian subjectivity. In the late 1980's into the 1990's, the "fashion industry [began] to capitalize" on "one segment of the lesbian population – the predominantly white, predominantly childless, middle-class, educated lesbian with disposable income,"[137] causing advertisers to engage in the dual marketing strategy of "lesbian window advertising," which specifically addresses lesbian consumers. This was in response to the growing popularity of a

[133] Clark, Danae. "Commodity Lesbianism." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (eds.) Routledge: New York and London, 1993, p. 186.
[134] Clark 1993, 187
[135] The obsession with 'measuring' the quantities of gay men in the US carries many implications that fall outside the scope of this paper.
[136] Hennessey 1995, 168
[137] Clark 1993, 190

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middle-class "lesbian chic" that "held the promise of putting lesbians front and center in both public and political life."[138] However, making visible and marketing a bourgeois lesbian identity did less to promote political aspirations than it did to commodify a particular lesbian image; Clark supports this point in arguing that, "contemporary advertisers are more interested in lesbian consumers than lesbian politics."[139] Hennessey also claims that such an approach "ultimately nourishes the commodity's gravitation towards the new, the exotic, the spectacular,"[140] which was embodied in the emergence of 'lesbian chic' and which companies capitalized on as an opportunity to target both lesbian and straight dollars.

6.2 Visible vs. Imaginary

In my analysis of the construction of lesbian identities it is important to pull apart a discontinuity between the ideological image of a stereotypical lesbian - brought forth in one's imagination as the quintessential, and negatively associated, 'butch dyke' in mainstream society, from the material and social image produced by consumer culture - the "vanilla" representation of 'lesbian' promised in 'lesbian chic';[141] keeping in mind that it is possible for both representations to stand alone, mix unevenly with one another, or conflate to embody an androgynous or sexual indeterminate (life)style, image, and/or identity. To help demonstrate these two representations further, in "Making her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lebianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990's," Ann Ciasullo asserts that it is important "to underscore the distinction between the butch's presence in the cultural *imagination* and her lack of presence on cultural *landscapes*;" thus exposing the incongruity between ideological

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[138] Schorb, Jodi R.; Hammidi, Tania N. "Sho-Lo Showdown: The Do's and Don'ts of Lesbian Chic." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn, 2000), p. 259.
[139] Clark 1993, 196-197
[140] Hennessey 1995, 161
[141] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 260

imagination and material image in that the "butch who is so closely aligned with the *idea* of lesbianism is curiously absent from cultural *representation*," in mainstream portrayals.[142]

Before going further, it is important to note that stereotypes of lesbian subjectivities[143] are not as cleanly separable as their mainstream depictions and imaginations would suggest. Rather, aspects of lesbian 'butchness' fashioned together with 'femme' styles coalesce into visible queer identities made intelligible through the operations of commodity capitalism. Also, the categories of 'butch' and 'femme' should be unhinged from their heteronormative presuppositions (butch/femme as the inferior analogy to man/woman) and rather understood as existing alongside an abundance of styles as well as "a historically [community, and lifestyle] specific construct" that ranges from campy role-playing to the fluid conflation of both lifestyles, and should not be subjected to limiting binary definitions nor easily paralleled by dichotomies of normative masculinity and femininity. So as my analysis deals with the terms 'butch' and 'femme', I do not intend to constrain their historical meanings or implications nor is it my intention to pin down their contemporary usages. Rather, my purpose is to reveal the complex intersections of meanings that collude in the politics of lesbian intelligibility.

6.3 'Lesbian Chic' vs. 'Butch Dyke'

Lesbian visibility in mainstream culture is inextricable from discourses on beauty. As Jodi Schorb and Tania Hammidi insist in, "Sho-Lo Showdown: The Do's and Don'ts of Lesbian Chic," lesbian standards of beauty "are both influenced by and negotiated against not only mainstream female beauty standards, but lesbian regimes of beauty;" which attests the complexity of lesbian (life)style images. Schorb and Hammidi point out that "discourses of

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[142] Ciasullo, Ann M. "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990's." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), p. 579.
[143] It is important to note that stereotypes are culturally and socially specific and I am addressing dominant stereotypes of lesbians in the US mainstream cultural imagination, namely that 'butch' and 'femme' follow as having normatively masculine and feminine characteristics and appearance.

beauty necessarily engage in discourses on value,"[144] which connect standards of beauty to judgments of worth. Recognizing this significant connection also begs the question, whose standards of measurement are being used and proliferated to put forth a paradigm of 'acceptable' beauty and what are those standards being measured against? While Ann Ciasullo articulates an important discontinuity between ideological and material representations of lesbian images, it should not be overlooked that the representation of the 'butch lesbian' in cultural imaginations is also predicated on real lesbian (life)styles and experiences; experiences that are often used as terms of abjection as well as to signify the social positioning of multiple lesbian subjectivities. Reasons for the absence of the stereotypical 'butch dyke' in popular culture are layered with anxieties over identity formations, systems of value, and class implications.

For instance, as in "most communal identity-formation projects, lesbians tend to define ourselves as much by what we are, as what we are *not*."[145] Thus, 'lesbian chic' offers a "vanilla representation of lesbian culture *made possible by* the difference from 'bulldykes' and the purported 'butch/femme' group."[146] What Hennessey refers to as, "class-regulated visibility,"[147] applies to the image of the 'butch lesbian,' who gets historically posited as having attachments to working-class identities and significations. This helps explain the lack of visible 'butch dyke' stereotypes on mainstream landscapes (due to the lack of non-bourgeois queer styles) while their stigmatizing image gets simultaneously proliferated in cultural imaginations, in part due to the fear of 'lesbianism' and its implications in hegemonic patriarchy.[148] The contemporary middle-class, predominantly white, childless, and educated

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[144] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 255
[145] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 257, emphasis in text
[146] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 260, emphasis mine
[147] Hennessey 1995, 173
[148] By this I am referring to claims made by Monique Wittig in her essay, "The Straight Mind;" namely the fear of the 'lesbian' who, by refusing sexual and social relationships with man (and thereby refusing heterosexuality), also refuses the economic, political, and ideological power of man (thus falling outside the category of 'woman') and risks toppling the foundational elements of heteropatriarchy. I also argue that

image of the lesbian generated by capitalist consumption sets up a value system of class status that parallels dynamics of power. What I mean to assert is that discourses celebrating the "upward mobility and material success embodied" by the 'lesbian chic' persona necessarily "associates 'peripheral' bodies (the working-class) and 'peripheral' places [rural landscapes]" negatively with representations of 'butch dykes,' which consequently gives bourgeois lesbian (life)styles higher degrees of, what Bourdieu calls, cultural capital; while styles of working-class lesbians (read: bulldaggers) are rendered undesirable.[149] Schorb and Hammidi support this point by asserting that, dominant "lesbian style is made possible by its exiles;" the foregrounding of a middle-class lesbian subjectivity both carries and relies on specific exclusions, namely of those who do not model popular lesbian codes. It should also be noted that the popularity of a 'butch' gay style depends on what community it circulates within and should not be uncritically discounted as always already an undesirable (life)style; rather its currency as a status of identification should be understood as individual- and community-specific.

As noted above, politics of visibility are intertwined with discourses on beauty and representations of the trendy 'lesbian chic' style are often problematic in mainstream contexts. Its image, as argued by Ciasullo, puts forth a version of lesbianism that is "normalized and heterosexualized via the femme body," making

> the mainstream lesbian body at once sexualized and desexualized: on the one hand, she is made into an object of desire for straight audiences through her heterosexualization, a process achieved by representing the lesbian as embodying a hegemonic femininity and thus, for mainstream audiences, as looking 'just like' conventionally attractive straight women; on the other hand, because the representation of desire between two women is usually suppressed in these images, she is de-homosexualized.[150]

capitalist culture promotes a middle-class, non-threatening image of lesbianism that advances equalizing logics of "just like us" (read: straight) serving to calm anxieties in mainstream heterosexual society.
Wittig, Monique. The Straight Mind and Other Essays. Beacon Press, 1992, pp. 1-32.

[149] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 261
[150] Ciasullo 2001, 578

So, in addition to being measured against normatively feminine standards of beauty, the 'femme' body as 'lesbian chic' is also in a constant state disempowerment, simultaneously upholding a 'straight-looking' non-threatening image while also concealing homo-erotic desires. Pellegrini refers to this watered-down version of lesbianism that gets marketed to the mainstream public, "stripped of its sexual and political sting" as "Lesbianism Lite."[151] Ciasullo further argues that the heterosexualization of the femme body also enables an "alignment of her femininity with specific racial and socioeconomic attributes," which position the body of 'lesbian chic' as "nearly always white, upper-middle class;" which simultaneously positions those lesbians who do not fall into the femme body as such (i.e. those who are not white, upper-middle class) as "invisible in media representations."[152] Therefore, such marginalized queer bodies get marked as undesirable in mainstream heterosexual culture.

6.4 Marketing Consumable Lesbians and Gay Men

In the politics of queer intelligibility, it is important to recognize for whom the 'lesbian-as-consumable-object' is being marketed. Companies serving a "conservative, family-oriented constituency"[153] distance themselves from sexualized images in favor of airbrushed scenes that depict "non-threatening" women who look "just like you" (read: white, bourgeois, straight-looking), which suggest not only an airbrushing of physical blemishes marking 'otherness' by popular magazines, but also of the sexual implications in lesbian lives and experiences. 'Lesbian chic' is the "palatable" representation of lesbianism allowed "for mainstream consumers to consume," because it sanitizes lesbian visibility through her feminizing, in order to "assure mainstream audiences that there is nothing 'different' about

[151] Pellegrini 2002, 143
[152] Ciasullo 2001, 578
[153] Pellegrini 2002, 139

lesbians."[154] The language of equality, or rather sameness, that gets advanced in the watered-down images of purported lesbian (life)styles works less to advocate for gay rights than it does to benefit capitalist economies. As Clark has demonstrated above, companies are more interested in "lesbian consumers than lesbian politics." However, there are always exceptions to the rule where visibility functions to foreground the presence of a "representative 'other',"[155] specifically *allowing* for the 'other's' visibility in mainstream culture in order to create a space for companies to "plausibly deny" the existence of homophobia that is alive and well in society. For example, the proliferation of popular androgynous styles modeled off of lesbian subjectivities attests *not* to a growing acceptance of non-heteronormativity but rather emphasizes the profitable exploitation of a style historically attached to lesbian identities. This point will be elaborated below in my analysis of androgyny.

Before going on to discuss representations of lesbian styles further, it is important to contrast my argument of the consumption of lesbian styles with that of gay male styles. The representations of gay men and lesbians in contemporary media culture is articulated by Ann Pellegrini's description of what she names as "two modes of hypervisibility;" where the first represents "bad subjects" (i.e. gay men, or possibly what Kanye West referred to as "blatantly gay" men) while the second sells "marketable, consumable objects," that of a bourgeois lesbian style.[156] Gay men are deemed "bad" due to dominant homophobic discourses portraying (implicitly or explicitly) male-male sex as both rampant and perverse. Although Pellegrini's analysis reveals an important distinction, it needs to be complexified further by taking into consideration the specificity of the audience. For instance, positing gay male subjects as "bad" is dependent upon the ways in which a gay male (life)style gets constructed by dominant culture as well as who interprets the constructions as such; as in the case of Absolut Vodka, the "Ruler" advertisement runs counter to dominant right-wing, homophobic

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[154] Ciasullo 2001, 585
[155] Ciasullo 2001, 588
[156] Pellegrini 2002, 142-143

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discourses. The success of sexualized and sexually suggestive adverts targeted for gay men also depend on how they take into account spatial awareness and temporal conditions. So, Absolut or Calvin Klein strategically run ad campaigns in urban, gay populated areas and at particular times (for example in West Hollywood before and during Gay Pride events) that explicitly and purposefully speak to an audience who are at once both created and consumed. Commodified gay male styles stand out in stark contrast to the de-sexualized lesbian styles sold to the public.

6.5 Androgyny

Although I have been discussing two visibly different lesbian styles (that of 'lesbian chic' and 'butch dyke'), neither should be understood as a bounded entity or as occupying consistent subject positions. The rise of 'lesbian chic' in the 1990's also yielded the popularity of androgynous styles for women which incorporate a normatively masculine appearance on bourgeois dominant representations. Clark's description of "lesbian window advertising" takes on multiple layers: the dual marketing strategy refers "not only to the two sets of readings formulated by homosexuals and heterosexuals," but also to interpretations "that exist *within* lesbian reading formations."[157] So, lesbians who are 'tuned-in' to gay modes of intelligibility are able to read several kinds of lesbian styles that the ad represents within mainstream culture. Clark also recognizes that "androgyny is a fashionable and profitable commodity,"[158] and as such companies "capitalize upon sexual ambiguity,"[159] as a marketing tactic.

However, Clark's analysis of androgyny bears a significant oversight. Clark interchanges the terms 'androgyny' and 'sexual indeterminancy' throughout her text, without attending to the subtle, but crucial, difference between the two. What I mean to say is that

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[157] Clark 1993, 194, emphasis in text
[158] Clark 1993, 192
[159] Clark 1993, 194

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although she recognizes androgyny to be a "fashionable and profitable commodity," it is one that must remain within the confines of sexual *non*-ambiguity to be fashionable and profitable as such. The androgynous style that gets marketed is one that is always predicated on a reliable knowledge of its opposite, of a *non*-androgynous subject. In other words, androgyny is popular in mainstream culture only to the extent that the audience or consumer has previous knowledge or is able to tell the 'true' (genital) sex and (socially constructed) gender of the subject (which may not always fall into alignment). Thus, androgyny is popular precisely because the known sex of the subject is consciously *trying* to put forth a gender non-specific presentation. Concomitantly, androgyny becomes problematic when the sex or gender of the subject cannot be 'properly' (read: normatively) established, thus entering the boundaries of sexual indeterminancy where the *too*-convincing androgynous subject breeds confusion, anxiety, and sometimes even fear located in both normative and non-normative communities.

When "bodies that fail to integrate,"[160] using Judith Halberstam's phrase, and thus transgress identity borders, anxieties abound. As Schorb and Hammidi point out, being "inconsistent, incongruous, and indecisive produces a kind of 'category crisis', confusing the onlooker" and sometimes "prompting a degree of hostility."[161] The anxious desire for continuity in mainstream society relates to Phelan's arguments above, that a lack of compliance with normative gender presentation and behavior consequently provokes assumptions about sexual orientation; this also marks the slide made between non-conformity and 'homosexuality'. Phelan points out the (stigmatizing) assumption of heteronormative culture to, "link gender rebellion to lesbianism and thus replicate the binary opposition of

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[160] Halberstam 1998, 147
[161] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 262: Although it is important to note that 'indecisiveness' may not apply to sexual ambiguity or indeterminancy, when individuals (for example many gay and transgender people) purposefully appear without attachments to any one specific sex or gender assignment.

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'woman' (= heterosexual) vs. 'lesbian'."[162] Due to the "hostility" that ambiguity breeds, the embodiment of 'lesbian chic' promotes a more stable lesbian identity that offers a 'safe androgyny' to fashion without facing problems that sexual indeterminancy may produce.

6.6 'Lesbian Chic' vs. Queer Androgyny

As I have mentioned above, there are always "exceptions to the rule" and in the case of 'soft' androgynous lesbian chic styles, there are also representations of more 'butch' presentations visible on our cultural landscapes. For instance, Ciasullo uses the example of k.d. lang, a popular lesbian musician in the 1990's whose appearance she explains as "highly unfemme" and who uses gender as a "game." Ciasullo argues that "however butch [her appearance] may be, her popularity has certainly not produced a mainstream landscape crowded with imitators."[163] I would argue that although Ciasullo recognizes a tenable phenomenon in the late twentieth century, her assertions do not hold up in present-day cultural media representations of the new millennium. To better exemplify my point, I will discuss the popular androgynous lesbian character, "Shane," who is exemplary of a fashionable 'queer androgyny', from the Showtime series, "The L Word," which aired six seasons from 2004-2009.

Both k.d. lang and the character of 'Shane' can be read as lesbians, however, where lang's style saw no "imitators" in mainstream heterosexual society, the proliferation of 'Shane's' style in the early 2000's disputes Ciasullo's point. 'Shane's' style is visibly modeled on both heterosexual and homosexual audiences, crossing boundaries between straight and gay, and male and female styles. Her character's style also supports Clark's assertion that marketing strategies "*create* consumer lifestyles that are profitable to

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162 Phelan 1993, 775
163 Ciasullo 2001, 588

advertisers," [164] and advertisers capitalized on the stylistic shift from the 1990's (when 'butch androgynous' was less desirable) to the twenty-first century which welcomes more noticeable gender-queer ambiguities. However, this shift and subsequent appropriation and commodification of 'Shane's' style are also telling of advertisers' economic interests rather than their political motivations or promotion of gay rights discourses. Furthermore, while advertisers take advantage of the profits 'Shane's' fashion sells, Hennessey points out that queers remain located within cultural frameworks where "the commodity is reduced to an ideological icon," thus "disrupting *semiotic* boundaries between gay and straight" but lacking material strategies of resistance that are able to break out of "the arena of cultural representation."[165] Therefore 'Shane's' style gets "condensed into a cultural signifier, the commodity remains securely fetishized," which works more to promote gay sensibilities than sites of "political intervention" for mainstream audiences.[166]

Therefore on one hand, the character of 'Shane' is also a representation of homo-normativity, putting forth a (life)style similar to that offered by the 'lesbian chic' persona, promising a "vanilla" visibility of lesbian identity but lacking to break material boundaries in mainstream society. One the other hand, it is important to clarify that I do not mean to present a homo-normative subjectivity as always connoting negative associations or as disallowing any space for queer empowerment, agency, and politics. Rather, although the use of 'Shane's' style is often a trendy appropriation of lesbian androgyny by normative culture, its potential for resistance should not be automatically disqualified nor should its appropriation disallow for the existence of spaces where oppositional power may become manifest.

As Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman argue, "the commodity is a central means by which individuals tap into the collective experience of public desire."[167] In some cases, the

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[164] Clark 1993, 189, emphasis in text
[165] Hennessey 1995, 161, emphasis in text
[166] Hennessey 1995, 160-161
[167] As quoted in Hennessey 1995, 160

presupposition of desired heterosexuality is challenged through the visibility of gay subjectivities, which are capable of offering resistance precisely because they are already functioning within mainstream culture. Schorb and Hammidi support this point by arguing for "the diverse ways lesbians negotiate cultural messages about masculinity and femininity; butch, femme, or androgynous styles; race, space, and class," and how such negotiations work to "redefine beauty" standards.[168] They also suggest that capitalist consumption and practices of visibility "might be understood as politicized processes of negotiating personal and cultural ambivalences,"[169] working *with* commodification rather than presumed to be always already struggling against it.

Shane, "The L Word"

Chapter 7: 'Passing' and the Politics of Visibility

7.1 Consumer vs. Social Subjects

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[168] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 264
[169] Schorb and Hammidi 2000, 264

"Secular, commodity-driven society is dominated by the realm of the visible."

-Linda Martin Alcoff[170]

The multi-layered activity of gay (life)style appropriation by heterosexual mainstream culture and the reflection of dominant queer intelligibility is produced by and based on assumptions about class and race. As Gluckman and Reed point out, "these stereotypes of wealthy freespending gay consumers," help to "cultivate a narrow but widely accepted definition of gay identity as a marketing tool and help to integrate gay people *as* gay people into a new marketing niche."[171] However, as constantly reminded above, it is important to both ask and recognize who profits from capitalizing on visible gay subjectivities and at whose cost? It is my intention here to problematize issues of visibility as well as discuss how the politics of queer intelligibility resonate between different identity categories.

With capitalism's appropriation of gay 'styles' for mainstream audiences, as both Hennessey and Clark argue, gays are "welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects."[172] Thus while gays are consumable, but not wholly social and while mainstream queer (life)styles are more and more becoming part of a general cultural landscape in the United States, gay and queer rights discourses are being abstracted away from their activist routes, enabling space for discourses of resistance to shift and change. Markers of identity are paramount to the ways in which, "learned visual cues demarcate and organize human kinds,"[173] as argued by Alcoff. Visual markers and politics of intelligibility signify social, economic, and cultural positioning, while the historical relations and meanings embedded within those markers are often rendered invisible or powerless. These are illustrative of the ways in which a particular body comes to be emblematic of a privileged identity through practices of visibility. "Privileging visibility," argues Lisa Walker in, "How

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[170] Alcoff 2006, 5-6
[171] Quoted in Hennessey 1995, 173, emphasis in text
[172] Clark as quoted in Hennessey 1995, 143
[173] Alcoff 2006, 198

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to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are," is a tactic of identity politics in which "participants symbolize their demands for social justice by celebrating visible signifiers of difference that have historically targeted them for discrimination,"[174] in and by dominant culture.

However, the politics of visibility do not always work for purposes of social justice. Walker goes on to state that "the privileging of visibility," plays on "the hegemonic cultural imaginary's desire to see and interpret otherness in order to guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position into question,"[175] as quoted from Marjorie Garber's, *Vested Interests*. So, politics of visibility come invested with power, class, and race relations and implications, and as it has been argued, subjects who do not present 'proper' signifiers are often neglected. Likewise, subjects who "pass" and therefore "exceed the categories of visibility that establish identity," are then regarded as "peripheral to the understanding of marginalization,"[176] as such individuals are assumed to forego practices of discrimination.

7.2 'Passing'

'Passing' is a socially and culturally specific phenomena that refers to an individual's ability (which does not have to be either conscious or desired) to fall outside of visible significations and codes that purport to establish identity and meaning. 'Passing' is indicative of instances where one's 'gaydar' necessarily fails by wrongly interpellating an individual's sexual orientation. For example, the femme lesbian may not be recognized as gay due to her lack of stereotypical coded lesbian styles; likewise, the normatively masculine gay man 'passes' as straight in specific contexts. As Celia Lury points out, "the circulation and

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[174] Walker, Lisa. "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are." *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Theorizing Lesbian Experience (Summer, 1993), p. 868.

[175] Walker 1993, 868

[176] Walker, 1993, 868

exchange of the commodity" is characterized by problems "involving knowledge, information, and ignorance;"[177] this is indicative of the complexities of commodification and underscores the ability of 'passing' to expose assumptions and anxieties in constructed identity formations.

Additionally, it is critical to understand that the different ways in which subjects 'pass' cannot always be equalized or easily paralleled with the experiences of other 'passing' subjects. Thus, although straight men can 'pass' as gay, I would argue that 'passing' from a privileged to a stigmatized position carries different implications and politics for both the subject and the wider community than does 'passing' from the margins to the center. The politics of 'passing' attests to the inseparability of identity categories as well as to the ways in which certain aspects of an individual become visible in certain contexts yet simultaneously remain invisible in others. Slides made from privileged to peripheral identity positions are representative of the arbitrariness that practices of discrimination can be hinged upon.

Alcoff argues that, "marginal styles of embodiment" tend to represent an entire "'race', 'gender', or 'sexuality', now interpreted as signs of inclusion and authenticity,"[178] which serves to further disempower and exploit the marginalized population that gets 'embodied' by the privileged subject. By adopting a "marginalized style of embodiment" which, as Katie King points out, creates "the reduction of whole systems of signifiers to a single privileged signifier;"[179] the subject reinforces an undifferentiated understanding of subjectivity. 'Passing' from either the center or the fringe is linked to politics of exclusion, which automatically reduces power (of those who have it) to a formalism of membership. This can be linked to Bourdieu's theory of social positioning discussed earlier. For example, those who are 'included' improve their social position (or 'pass') also receive a degree of power. However it is important to acknowledge who defines the codes of membership and at

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[177] Lury 1996, 53
[178] Alcoff 2006, 197
[179] As quoted in Walker 1993, 869

whose expense; while additionally recognizing the volatility of membership as the shifting modes of intelligibility are fragile, unstable, and commodifiable.

While I acknowledge the variability and inseparability of subjectivities and identity categories, I would also like to argue that in particular times and spaces it is possible for comparisons to be made, logics of member/non-member rationalities to be obeyed and shared commonalities along racial and queer determinants of identity to exist. Instead of automatically discounting the possibility of analogous traits, I would argue that the transcendence of identities is contingent upon temporality, spatial context, and cultural systems of value. This argument runs counter to Michael Warner's claims denying the existence of queer Diasporas, shared meaning, or the translatability of queer to other "minority" movements.[180] By these assertions I do not mean to misinterpret Warner's argument, namely that "queerness, race, and gender can *never* be brought into parallel alignment," and by using "race, class, and gender" as such "implies the tactics and values of one can be assumed and appropriated by another." [181] Rather I agree with Warner, but I also mean to open up space for particular instances where queer culture and politics *can* find comparisons with other "movements."

For instance, Walker asserts that "the feminine lesbian cannot be studied in isolation from the idiom of race passing,"[182] which resonates in a context where both the feminine 'passing' lesbian, and the light-skinned 'passing' African-American may be able to share a similar experience of identity displacement; however I do not mean to argue that such an experience also links both 'passing' figures either historically or in future circumstances. While I am not advocating for the uncritical equivalency of determinants of identity, I am arguing that in particular moments and/or spaces, it is possible for determinants to take on shared meaning. I do not intend to list all instances, as my efforts would be in no way

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[180] Warner 1993, xvii
[181] Warner 1993, xviii, emphasis mine
[182] Walker 1993, 11

representative nor exhaustive, rather it is my aim to suggest that spaces do exist where comparisons can be made and valued rather than immediately foreclosed.

Questions of 'passing' are also inextricable from discourses on truth. As Linda Alcoff points out in, "*Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*," the "*truth* of one's gender and race are widely thought to be visibly manifest."[183] Similarly, the 'truth' of one's inherent sexual identity is also considered to be interpretable through visual markers. However, issues of visibility reveal 'passing' to be a deeply complex process intertwined with determinants of identity that may work to both deconstruct and strengthen assumptions about race, class, and sexuality. As Alcoff argues, because "visual differences ensure a social disparity,"[184] it is always important to ask at whose cost and with what implications do individuals benefit from 'passing' in certain contexts. However, Alcoff mainly focuses on and privileges perceptions of gender and race while underestimating the politics of visibility in sexuality. She tends to overlook the intimate links between identity markers and commodity culture, which are crucial to informing the experience of perception.[185] She states that "homosexuality can be rendered invisible on the street,"[186] but neglects to ask by whom and through what operations?

Alcoff seems to understand gay subjects monolithically and takes for the granted the degrees of variability that exist *within* queer identities and cultures. She also overlooks the fact that the context in which individuals may 'pass' can be multiple; for instance, a lesbian can pass as a man, as straight, as white, etc. which attests to "the diverse meanings [embedded within] the word *passing*."[187] It is also important to note that by explaining the concept of 'passing' I do not mean to assume that all people can easily fit and slide between categories of identity. Rather, it is important to recognize, as Trinh T. Minh-ha argues, "the

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[183] Alcoff 2006, 7
[184] Alcoff 2006, 196
[185] Alcoff 2006, 196
[186] Alcoff 2006, 7
[187] Walker 1993, 879, emphasis in text

historical positioning of those who cannot adopt the mask of either 'self' or 'other'"[188] as well as to be cognizant of the way in which constructions of identity often privilege visibility along hierarchies of oppression. It is important to expose the representations of culturally intelligible notions of identity as narrowly limited to the realm of visibility and therefore subject to exclusions, codes, politics, and assumptions, thus rendering identities incapable of ever being fully visually disclosed, if indeed that is possible.

By problematizing the politics of visibility through 'passing', I do not mean to advocate for the abolition of identity categories; rather, it was my intention to make clear the complex practices of visibility and their attachments to commodification in an effort to expose the taken for granted assumptions in 'gaydar' that are put forth by heteronormative culture. I am supporting both Alcoff and Walker in claiming that "visibility" is not only "the means of segregating and oppressing human groups," but also, Alcoff adds, "the means of manifesting unity and resistance."[189] However, it must be recognized that it is only through critical reflection and analysis of the politics of visibility and how such politics are manifested in queer intelligibility that allows for the uses of oppositional power and resistance to be capitalized on and appropriated; and such reflexive analysis must also account for the invisibility of 'othered' queer identities *as well as* the acknowledgment that 'their' exclusion may be desired as much as it may be forced.

Conclusion

We cannot escape the culturally-produced modes of perception hinged upon our historical and social circumstances. The practices of 'gaydar' are widely used and functional in popular culture (and will continue to be) due to the visibility of certain gay styles. Capitalism and commodity-culture in the United States manufacture an image of a certain

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[188] As quoted in Walker 1993, 870
[189] Alcoff 2006, 7

class-specific queer subject to heterosexual and gay consumer populations which then gets produced as 'the' dominant gay subjectivity. This in turn produces a dominant, standardized center that becomes recognizable and intelligible due to the specific invisibility of race and class differences. It was my intention to elucidate the foundational assumptions necessary to 'read' an individual's sexuality as well as to analyze the politics instrumental in making queers intelligible. With less time constraints and a broader scope of analysis, I would have explored the excesses of meaning in the term 'queer' as well and traced the historical development of its appropriations and complex, contemporary usages in present-day settings.

It was my intention for this thesis, as Linda Alcoff describes, to illustrate "the ways identity can open doors or shut them, yield credibility or withhold it, create comfort or produce anxiety."[190] My analysis of queer visibility was crucial in exposing underlying anxieties that exist within issues of sex and gender alignment and the subsequent wish for larger communal identification, and the problematic assertion of a pre-given, racially unmarked, bourgeois queer (life)style in mainstream culture. My aim in doing so was to underscore the complex and intricate ties queer intelligibility has to capitalist consumption, as well as to suggest that, "the messiness of the present might be something to be valued,"[191] and acknowledged; rather than perpetually mystified or abruptly dismissed. It is crucial to acknowledge the production, exploitation, and inseparable factors of identity that complexify the politics of queer intelligibility in order to understand the arbitrariness involved in 'reading' sexual orientation. Instead of maintaining dominant presumptions that parallel and equalize queer (life)styles, "we simply need to learn *to see* better,"[192] and to admit the existence of multiple experiences of struggle, recognition, and identity formation as contingent upon positionality and socio-cultural historical specificities.

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[190] Alcoff 2006, ix
[191] Pellegrini 2002, 143-144
[192] Alcoff 2006, 204

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