

Introduction

Unspeakably Queer

I'm sitting on an old couch. It's soft from wear, and the cushions give out beneath me. I feel smaller and skinnier than I already am. The room is warm and intentionally so. A heater buzzes in the corner. A fern wilts sadly beneath a lamp. There's a bookcase with one shelf full of books and three shelves filled with baseballs, each encased in glass. Across from me is a portable whiteboard, the kind with wheels that football coaches use to diagram plays in movies. My therapist sits beside it. He has one knee draped over the other, a clipboard in his lap, and a pen tapping against his thigh.

This is my third session with Joe, but he's not really my therapist. Or, rather, he's not a therapist, really. Joe is a conversion therapist hired by my parents to make their child less gay. Preferably straight, otherwise committed to celibacy. The first session had been a diagnostic meeting. I remember spending the last thirty minutes alone in the waiting room while Joe discussed my prognosis with my parents. We all left in good spirits. The second session was just between Joe and me, but it was largely a continuation of the first, albeit with more graphic questions. "How often do you lust over men, John? And how often do these lustful fantasies lead to masturbation? Approximately how many of your homoerotic masturbatory sessions lead to orgasm?" I answered each question in earnest. I was in fact quite committed to getting better, straighter.

This third session is supposed to be when the therapy starts. I sit in the sunken couch, and Joe stares at me. I'm crying, which is predictable. I'm a sad, anxious, feminine boy with undiagnosed complex post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and autism;

we are a species who cry. At sixteen, I am scared and ashamed. Kids at school call me “fag”; Joe says it’s same-sex attraction. The former bites worse than the latter.

“Same-sex attraction is reversible,” Joe tells me, and I believe him. “If you want to be good, if you want to follow God’s law, if you really want it, you can change.”

But I continue to cry because even though I want to be good, even though I want to change, I’m not good enough, and I’m not changing at all. Earlier just that day, I lusted over the boy next to me in Algebra II. At least, I think I lusted. I’m not really sure. I didn’t have a masturbatory session, so does it still count as lust? Probably. Still crying.

Joe pats my knee and then stands to use the whiteboard. He writes DAD and JOHN in bold letters. “Do you love your dad?” he asks me.

“Well, yeah, of course,” I respond, sniffing.

“Do you want to be like him when you get older?”

I don’t answer right away. My dad is mean, violent. A bully. “Maybe, like, some parts of him.”

“Why only some parts?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your dad is a man, isn’t he?” Joe frowns.

“Yeah.” I nod.

“And you want to be a man, don’t you?”

I nod again, even though now that I’m thinking about it, I’m unsure. Something about Joe’s insinuation that I am not yet a man makes me excited, and I feel guilty immediately.

“So if you want to be a man, why wouldn’t you want to be like your dad?”

“I dunno. We’re just different, that’s all.”

“And isn’t that difference why you’re here?”

I say nothing.

“Look, John.” Joe sits back down. “You’re struggling right now because you’re confused about who you are. You’re a man in the making. You hear me? You’re going to be a man someday. Once you believe that, the rest of this stuff”—he opens his arms widely, gesturing to the extent of my homoerotic affliction—“will figure itself out. If you spend all your time worrying about how you feel and who you want, you will never be happy. You will be alone, just wandering through

life. The gay lifestyle is like that, John. It is lonely and sick. It's full of men who don't know who they are, men who never had anyone tell them, 'You're a man! Start acting like one!'" Joe leans forward and puts his hand on my knee. My pulse quickens, and my groin aches. "Who are you, John?"

I don't know what to say. I didn't feel any of the things I was supposed to feel. I didn't like girls. The thought of being a man unnerved me. I couldn't even imagine having sex with a girl as a man. I place my hand lightly on top of Joe's, thinking it's what he wanted. I tremble.

Joe stands and pushes me back against the couch, leaving a finger in the center of my chest. "Who are you?" His finger presses harder into me.

"I don't know." And I don't. I cross my knees to cover the tent growing through my shorts.

Joe grabs both my shoulders. "You're a man, John. Say it."

"I'm a man."

"You're a man."

"I'm a man."

"You're a man."

The day on which this scene occurred, some afternoon in June 2010, was the day I like to believe that I started writing this book. Following that session with Joe, I continued in conversion therapy for another eighteen months and wouldn't come out as gay or trans for another four and five years, respectively. I wouldn't receive any of my diagnoses for another six years (not that diagnoses are necessary for a disability identity). And I wouldn't physically write the first sentence of this project for another ten years. But I like to believe I started writing that day when I was sixteen because it was then, in a humid room on a shabby couch, that I realized the power of silence. It was then that I learned that absence could be generative, that what remains undone, unseen, unheard, and untouched could be not only transformative but world-building. And more than that, I learned that my trans, (neuro)queer bodymind held the capacity to wield these world-building absences strategically, in ways that helped me to survive in spite of the conditions of my childhood, which were bent on moralizing and subsequently pathologizing how I moved, spoke, longed, lusted, and loved. As I argue here and throughout the

following pages, what occurred that afternoon was not merely Joe's attempt to police me into a docile state of ashamed submission but also my resistance to his attempt, a resistance born and bred by a queer silence.

In this book, I propose *queer silence* to name both the surprising potentialities of silence to generate meaning from absence and the ways people on the margins of society tap into these potentialities in order to build community, navigate hostile spaces, and resist forms of institutional and state-sponsored violence. This definition is indebted to, even as it departs from, existing work on *queer* and *silence* as independent concepts. I use *queer* to reference a political position rooted in the dissension occasioned by an inequitable power relation. Following many queer studies scholars, I do not reduce *queer* to "some homogenized identity," such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or asexual, but understand it as a space for marginalized populations to coalesce across lines of difference.¹ Queer silence is not code for gay silence. Even so, I acknowledge that the anti-identitarian impulse of queer studies is a colonial fantasy, one fueled by futile attempts to empty the field of its specific historical, geographic, raced, classed, gendered, and disabled contexts.² I am thus inclined to locate *queer's* use value neither in its mainstream, identitarian uptake nor in its intellectualized, anti-identitarian critique. Instead, I value *queer* for both its capacity to dissent from, reject, and resist normativity as well as how this capacity fosters a range of situated and local hungers for worlds that are new, different, and better. This is a *queer* informed by José Esteban Muñoz as "a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination."³ As a kernel, it is pure potentiality. As anticipatory, it is on the cusp of its own becoming. *Queer* as trajectory, as orientation toward futurity, as desire.

Silence, as I understand it, attends to the rhetoricity of queerness, the way *queer* signifies what would otherwise remain nameless and neglected. More broadly, silence catalyzes signification, at once holding space for a sign's precipitation and orienting audiences toward the appropriate modality for its emergence. It is thus the route *queer* takes on its journey from contingent abjection to substance in its own right. Silence mobilizes *queer*. But silence is also queer all on its own. Borrowing from Erin J. Rand's description of queerness as a "general

economy of undecidability,”⁴ I argue that silence is similarly unstable and uncontainable, serving as “both the condition of possibility for agency *and* that which can never be expressed through form.”⁵ Silence, though meaningful, is inarticulable; it can only find its articulation through the nonverbal modalities to which it draws attention. When a person is silent, we might read their silence not only as an absence of speech but also as an invitation to consider other ways they are signifying. Silence is a gesture toward visual, material, haptic, and other embodyminded modalities that can signify in tandem with or independently from the verbal register. The absence of speech might cue us to further inspect how else an object (or subject) is speaking. In this way, I position silence as a rhetorical absence: a lacuna that harkens to meaning found elsewhere.

Queer silence, as the imbrication of the queerly silent and silently queer, is the coming together of silence’s endless referentiality and queerness’s utopian entelechy. Queer silence captures the ways that queer people pursue the worlds they long for with/in silence. Sometimes this silence is loud and includes conventional forms of verbal speech, but it is always a silence enriched by the capacity of queer people to take hold of our queerness—to harness the significations that mark us for abjection and reappropriate them toward new ends. Indeed, the bodyminds of queer people have long been layered in significations that bear no connection to verbal speech. Queer folks signify, whether we’re speaking or not. What convinced my parents to enroll me in conversion therapy, for instance, was not a speech act on my part (e.g., “Mom, Dad, I’m gay.”) but my visual, haptic, and embodyminded significations: my obsession with scarves, my swishy gait, my sensitiveness, and the extra time I spent dawdling in the men’s locker room after swim practice. Queer silence is how I held onto the idea that I might not yet be a man, even as Joe coaxed me into admitting that I was. It is a strategy queers use to make do with the bodyminds we have. It is how we make ourselves heard when nobody is listening.

Unfortunately, among the groups who are least likely to listen to queers are themselves self-identified LGBT people who attempt to shore up their own homo- and transnormativity by distancing themselves from those who cannot or will not approximate white and non-disabled sexual and gender norms.⁶ This book is particularly invested

in the relationship between *disability* and *queer*, both as racialized identity categories and as subject positions offering unique epistemologies. *Disability*, as I use it, is a broad term that encompasses a wide variety of embodyminded difference, including physical, intellectual, cognitive, psychiatric, and sensory impairments, as well as forms of neurodivergence, D/deafness, disease, and chronic illness that may be less readily associated with disability. I lean into *disability*'s capaciousness not because I believe it is the "correct" term that reveals a biological or medical truth about people but because its singularity exposes the breadth of ableism, the way ableism stretches and folds itself into nearly every domain of life. Like *queer*, *disability* refers to a colonial construct that is commonly employed by the medical-industrial complex to demarcate racialized thresholds of embodyminded variation. But again like *queer*, *disability* has been reclaimed by some people as a source and signifier of pride. Disability activism and disability justice movements have worked to usurp the authority of medicine that distinguishes normative instantiations of human difference (we call it "diversity") from abnormal ones (we call it "pathology"). This form of disability critique resembles queer studies' commitment to "resist state regulation" in all its many iterations, especially those that rely on a medical model to valorize the white cis-hetero-ablednormative bodymind.⁷

Indeed, it is in part because of their shared histories of (resisting) pathologization that disability and queerness have been thought together with increasing enthusiasm over the past two decades. Their intersection not only provides a useful site for coalitional organizing—ways of critiquing medical sovereignty on multiple fronts—but also works to destabilize both terms' coherence as independent categories. Ableddness and heterosexuality are revealed as mutually reinforcing, thereby rendering disability and queerness as "unstable, distributed, lively."⁸ Disability betrays the compulsory abledness entangled with heterosexuality that, in turn, exposes the queerness of disability.⁹ To be disabled is to occupy one's bodymind queerly. This reading of disability is most often referred to in the context of crip theory, popularized by Robert McRuer's eponymous book, which politicizes the queerness of disability while also ensuring that disability's queer politics are not reducible to queerness. That is, crip theory contends with disability's nonconformance as resonant but not synonymous with

the place of queer in queer studies. While McRuer's work has seen its fair share of critiques,¹⁰ there has been relative consensus on his central observation that, to some degree, disability and queerness are contingent. And while I take no issue with his argument, *per se*, I am interested in situating it alongside the oft-neglected history of queer/disability's relationship within the purview of medicine and pathology. This is a relationship that far precedes the inventions of queer studies and disability studies, let alone their hybridization, and this project is a testament to the ongoing effects of their intimate histories in both fields. Prior to the institutionalization of disability and queer, I show that the relationship between the two categories was both secured and contested by gay activists' repeated attempts to divest homoeroticism from disability, not out of their concern for medicine's disciplinary function but because they feared disability's apparently intractable stigmas as deficit, deviance, and death.

This fear on behalf of gay activists not only led to missed opportunities for productive coalitions but also, as I argue below, dictated the terms by which queer studies would eventually come to (dis)regard disability. Despite the generativity of *crip theory*, I contend that there has yet to be sustained attention paid to the effects of homosexuality's pathologization on the figure of disability in queer studies. That is, in spite of the excitement surrounding the critical and political affordances of thinking queer and disability together, this excitement seems to forget that queer and disability have known each other for a long time. When the pathologization of homosexuality is discussed in the field of queer studies, it is almost always done so in the past tense or in the service of tracing negative affect. To talk about the pathologization of homosexuality is to talk about the invention of homosexuality as a social category,¹¹ to talk about histories of gay activism,¹² to talk comparatively between the history of sexuality and the contemporary medicalization of gender nonconformance,¹³ or to talk about legacies of shame, melancholia, and despair.¹⁴ Rarely does queer studies address the ongoing pathologization of homosexuality as it occurs now in conservative and religious circles across the United States, as well as in parts of Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa.¹⁵ And more rarely still does it attempt to reconcile the violently ableist and sanist legacies of gay liberation with their effects on the place of disability in

the field of queer studies today—effects that continue to link disability to self-loathing and pain. Among my primary goals with this project is to offer queer silence as a rhetorical methodology for opening up the intersection of queer and disability in light of their historical contingencies, thereby allowing for alternative crip futurities in queer studies that do not deny the violence of pathologization but still hold the field accountable for its dispossession of disability.

I specify queer silence as a rhetorical methodology because it is attentive to the flux of *queer's* meaning from moment to moment and place to place, as it shifts in tenor and substance, at times demarcating disability more or differently than sexuality. While the field of rhetorical studies has long been associated with argumentation and civic debate, I draw on queer, disability, and feminist approaches that use a wider net to reveal the meaning-making strategies enacted by minoritarian populations to defend themselves against dominant discourses.¹⁶ Typically speaking from a place of simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility, where their voices are ignored even as their bodies are more intensely scrutinized, these queer, disabled, gender non-conforming, and racialized populations tap into the visual, material, and haptic modalities illuminated by queer silence to make known what would otherwise remain unheard. These nonverbal modalities demand an approach to rhetoric that is less situational than affective and ecological, tracing the “choreography”—to borrow from Erin Manning—of bodyminds as they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch one another, leaving dynamic impressions in real time.¹⁷ Rhetoric, in this sense, is less about the linear exchange of information from a single rhetor to an audience than it is about the production of meaning between and among living, breathing, and moving things and people. I will flesh out the contours of this rhetorical model a bit more later on and extensively in chapter 1, but it suffices to summarize here that the rhetoricity of queer silence lies in its openness to the many forms that *queer's* meaning might take and to the many itinerancies of its movement.

The organization of this book is roughly chronological. While the body chapters focus on queer silence in the present and recent past, the epilogue looks toward the future. In this introduction, I want to attempt a brief and partial history of silence in gay activism that

focuses on the role and figuration of disability vis-à-vis homosexuality and, later, *queer*. In subsequent chapters, the subject of disability flickers in and out of the primary argument, but throughout, the specter of disability haunts this project. The specter of disability might be best understood in terms of a supplementary methodology to rhetoric that, as Julie Avril Minich proposes, attends more closely to the norms and conditions that produce the category of disability than to the fact of disability itself.¹⁸ Sami Schalk, reflecting on Minich's work, explains that disability studies is most generative when it "is not dependent upon defining an object of analysis (no matter how expansive the definition), but rather focuses on the method of analysis instead."¹⁹ To recruit disability as a methodology alongside rhetoric is to dial out from the list of embodyminded conditions typically recognized as disabilities in order to better contextualize the processes by which disability comes to be named and, equally important, to illuminate those bodyminds rendered (non)normative through disability's invention. In this book, disability as methodology allows me to think disability as a technique of *queer's* incarnation.

Queer silence throws into relief the conceptual entanglement of disability and silence that occurred within multiple gay activist movements from the 1960s through the 1990s, when gays who didn't speak might as well have been mad or dead. The effects of this entanglement seeped into the nascent field of queer theory, and they continue to linger, influencing how the wider field of queer studies overlooks or overdetermines disability's pivotal role in its own formation. In consideration of these ongoing effects, I argue for *queer's* return to its original pathology, for a circling back to the people, spaces, discourses, and affects that once defined it. This (re)turn effectively calls for queer studies to shift its attention away from legible forms of queerness toward the vast and shifting realms of the illegible, away from what people are saying to what they aren't, away from who is speaking to who is remaining silent, and away from speech entirely toward the ways silence has been signifying all along. Part of this shift in attention requires renegotiating the field's relationship to disability, so as to acknowledge it not only as a parallel line of lived experience or as an intersecting vector of marginalization but also as a necessary condition for *queer's* own emergence. In calling for queer studies to

reconcile with silence, I am thus demanding it also take stock of its own histories of disability, as well as those variations of queerness that themselves seem disabled, broken, inefficient, and incapacitated. This is the realm of queer silence: worlds of uncomfortably *queer*, excessively *queer*, illegibly *queer*, and not quite *queer* enough.

Historicizing Silence

We might begin these interrelated projects by examining two instances when disability figured prominently, though admittedly not favorably, in queer history. Following Christopher Nealon's observation that modern conceptions of queer identity emerged from "a determined struggle to escape the medical-psychological 'inversion' model of homosexuality that was dominant in the United States in the first half of the [twentieth] century," I analyze two examples of gay activists working to extract homosexuality from the realms of illness and disease, ultimately with the hope of categorically distinguishing homosex from disability.²⁰ While these two examples are not the first or only of their kind, I believe they have been among the more influential on the role of disability (and silence) in the field of queer studies. In both, *disability's* perceived deviance exceeds *queer's* power of reclamation, operating "as the trope and embodiment of true physical difference."²¹ Silence functions as tolerance or, worse, endorsement for disability's aberrance. Disability, in these instances, is simply too queer, and silence is too suspicious. Disability's pathological stigma is too deeply entrenched, its material-discursive reactions too complex. Disability is crazy. Disability is dying. Disability, unlike homosexuality, cannot be recovered or recuperated. Disability is dangerous company—too dangerous even for sex—and silence leaves a person's allegiances entirely up to the imagination. As a result, in each example, activists use and demand speech to reject disability in favor of a purer, less threatening, more aesthetically pleasing, and more easily intellectualized variation of homosexuality. More than that, these activists rhetorically position the experience of disability against queer sexualities, so that *disability* is not only different from *queer* but also maintains a constitutive tension. Indeed, it is only in the absence of disability, I suggest, that *queer* remains coherent.

In the early 1960s, Frank Kameny, a prominent homophile organizer and president of the Mattachine Society's D.C. chapter, began arguing for the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. Central to Kameny's position was that homosexuality was a perfectly natural variation of human sexuality and thus should never have been categorized as a mental illness.²² Historian Regina Kunzel notes that this line of argument "became the defining project of the emerging gay rights movement," quickly growing into what seemed "necessary to the political intelligibility of gay people."²³ While the sexological invention of homosexuality in the mid-nineteenth century may have paved the way for a gay subject position, it was the concerted effort to depathologize homosexuality that explicitly politicized this position. The early gay rights movement was convinced that distancing itself from medical authority was necessary in order to become the face of a disenfranchised community, and the primary method used to erect this distance was to deny any and all relationship between homosexuality and disability, especially mental illness.

Perhaps surprisingly, Kameny acknowledged the possibility for solidarity across sexual and disability lines, even as he ultimately refused it. In a 1965 essay for *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review*, he writes:

There are those who say that the label appended [to homosexuality] really doesn't matter. Let the homosexual be defined as sick, they say, but just get it granted that even if sick, he can function effectively and should therefore be judged only on his individual record and qualifications, and it is that state of being-judged-as-an-individual, regardless of labels, toward which we must work.²⁴

Though the perspective espoused in this passage does not include the kind of structural critique typically occasioned by queer/disability coalitional arguments today, it nevertheless avoids juxtaposing homosexuality against the "sick." Kameny goes on, however, to dismiss this position as a "woefully impractical, unrealistic, ivory-tower approach" that is entirely too risky for the future of gay liberation.²⁵ He explains:

Homosexuality is looked upon as a psychological question. If it is sickness or disease or illness, it becomes then a mental illness. Properly or improperly, people ARE prejudiced against the mentally ill. Rightly or wrongly, employers will NOT hire them. Morally or immorally, the mentally ill are NOT judged as individuals, but made pariahs. If we allow the label of sickness to stand, we will then have two battles to fight. . . . One such battle is quite enough!²⁶

Notably, Kameny skirts the question of whether homosexuals should ally themselves with their disabled comrades by focusing instead on the difficulty such a strategy would entail for gay activists. It is much easier, he claims, to punch down—to make an appeal for the liberal inclusion of sane homosexuals by reinforcing the exclusion of disabled people—than it is to punch up by taking neoliberalism to task for demanding consumerism in exchange for subjectivity. “We cannot,” he assured, “declare our equality and ask for acceptance and for judgment as whole persons, from a position of sickness.”²⁷

Kameny’s argument was not purely hypothetical. In addition to preaching the efficacy of his position, he insisted that other homosexuals be vocal about their own mental health. This insistence stemmed from Kameny’s certainty that homosexuality was not a disability and his belief that any argument for equality required “an affirmative, definitive assertion of health.”²⁸ In fact, Kameny fully admitted that if good evidence were to exist for the pathology of homosexuality that gay people would “have a moral obligation to seek cure,” implying that a medical model is the only ethical answer to disability.²⁹ In the absence of such evidence, Kameny pleaded that the homophile movement collectively and loudly maintain a position of total and absolute able-mindedness: “I feel that for the purposes of strategy, we must say this and say it clearly and with no possible room for equivocation or ambiguity.”³⁰ Equivocation and ambiguity, here, are the products of silence—what happens when people do not “say this and say it clearly.” Silence was to risk being further subsumed into disability and toward cure. To speak, however, was to demand acceptance by demonstrating mental fitness.

In 1971, Kameny had the chance to demonstrate this fitness for

himself when he attended the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, along with the Gay Liberation Front. To a room full of psychiatrists, he shouted, “We’re rejecting you all as our owners. We possess ourselves and we speak for ourselves and we will take care of our own destinies.”³¹ And come the revised *DSM-II* in 1973, when homosexuality was replaced by “sexual orientation disturbance,” his strategy vis-à-vis speech worked: being gay was no longer a mental illness. Homosexuality was formally depathologized, and as historian Douglas C. Baynton points out, “once gays and lesbians were declared not to be disabled, discrimination [against them] became less justifiable.”³²

Approximately fifteen years later, one winter night in 1987, Kameny’s insistence on queer speech resurfaced when six gay activists plastered “SILENCE=DEATH” posters across New York City. Against a solid black background, a fuchsia triangle hovers over the words that appear in bold, white letters. Beneath them, in much smaller font, reads:

Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable . . . Use your power . . . Vote . . . Boycott . . . Defend yourselves . . . Turn anger, fear, grief into action.³³

This poster, which has since become one of the most well-known icons for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and AIDS activism more broadly, revived Kameny’s assumption that political activism only works with a united front.

As Avram Finkelstein, one of the creators of the poster, recalls, “SILENCE=DEATH” was intended to be “a conversation starter.”³⁴ Its purpose was not only to hold the government, the medical-industrial complex, and the Church accountable for their failure to respond in an appropriate and timely manner to AIDS but also to “inspire action” among the people who were most at risk of seroconversion. Not unlike Kameny’s insistence that homosexuals had an individual responsibility to fight their pathologization, the “SILENCE=DEATH” poster placed similar pressure on people to advocate for themselves

or otherwise risk certain death. The silence mentioned in the poster functions as a reminder of institutional violence and state-sponsored neglect, as well as a call to arms. To resist silence, and thus to speak, became an imperative for gay people in particular. If they were going to survive, they had to demand it. Silence, by contrast, was understood as complicity with Reagan, the CDC, the FDA, the Vatican, and—perhaps most importantly—with the virus itself. Silence took on connotations of cowardice, shame, internalized hatred, and unimaginable privilege that afforded some people access to lifesaving drugs while allowing others to go without. For most people, to remain silent was to accept death—whether your own or that of your community. The “SILENCE=DEATH” poster made explicit a binary division between speech and silence that had undergirded queer life for the past several decades. One could not be both silent and alive. To live was to speak.

While the anxieties that surrounded this particular political and cultural moment began to fade by the mid-1990s after HIV had been named, testing protocols had been established, and protease inhibitors had been made more widely available in the United States, there is yet a distinct rhetorical effect of the first wave of the AIDS crisis that remains. Finkelstein refers to this phenomenon as “AIDS 2.0,” “its storytelling.”³⁵ Rhetoricians and historians might call AIDS 2.0 a kind of historiography that provides not an objective account of AIDS history (as if such a thing were possible) but rather a carefully crafted, deeply racialized, and markedly ableist narrative about AIDS. This narrative, as Black, transnational, and queer of color scholars point out, rests on “making the Global North the default referential point” and denying the AIDS crises that are ongoing throughout the Global South.³⁶ AIDS 2.0 celebrates the unmitigated success of single-axis visibility politics, effectively reducing the multiple geographies and temporalities of AIDS activism to a simple teleological arc, wherein white cis men narrowly but victoriously resist death. Finkelstein writes:

[AIDS 2.0 is] a parable that “proves” the system works in a way so predicated on the presumptive neutrality of whiteness, male physiology, pharmaceutical intellectual property rights, and a deregulation-mad political landscape that it turns its back to the

parts of the pandemic that continue to rage, offering a sense of resolution in its place.³⁷

Though the creation of HIV-management biotechnologies is an important part of AIDS history, it is only one part and certainly not the end of the story. As Finkelstein hints, the technical availability of protease inhibitors is not the same as guaranteeing access or education to use them.

AIDS remains a persistent and fatal threat for many populations, some living in the United States, who are Black, poor, incarcerated, disabled, or some combination thereof.³⁸ Bracketing AIDS as a historical event not only “obscures [its] continued biopoliticization”—the way resources for prevention and treatment are stratified along racial, class, disability, and geographic lines—but also fails to capture the multidimensionality of AIDS’s social life.³⁹ Cindy Patton explains that the crisis of AIDS has never been only about the virus or health care; rather, it has also included “the uneven distribution of rights and relationships (including spiritual), and even the distribution of the idea of ‘crisis’ itself.”⁴⁰ These variable and violent distributions mitigate the life chances of already marginalized persons, and the historical framing of AIDS 2.0 purports to neutralize their harm. *AIDS was so last century*, we are meant to believe, despite, as Nishant Shahani writes, “those queer subjects who still inhabit the here and now.”⁴¹

The temporal discontinuities produced by AIDS 2.0’s triumphalist account—those that subtend “the here and now” with a vision of AIDS-as-history—embed an overcoming narrative that belies the experiences of people still living with AIDS today. In narratives that include or are about disability, overcoming functions as a trope typically used to bypass structural critiques of ableism for more palatable stories of individual achievement. Rather than attending to the cultural and material obstacles that make life more difficult for people with disabilities, overcoming narratives decontextualize disability as an internal condition that can only be mourned or celebrated, depending on a person’s effort and capacity to realign themselves with normative standards of fitness, productivity, and desirability.⁴² Those who successfully overcome their disabilities are viewed as inspirations while those who do not are either pitied or made to feel guilty. Within the

context of AIDS, the overcoming narrative pits sexual health against HIV positivity, protecting normative (homo)sexuality from the taint of the virus.

In her analysis of safer-sex campaigns launched during the 1980s to combat the transmission of HIV among gay men, Karisa Butler-Wall argues that “ideals of mutual care, affection, and responsibility were marshaled to defend ‘the community’ against the threat of illness and disability, thereby marginalizing seropositive individuals and coding behaviors that might lead to seroconversion as dangerous and antisocial.”⁴³ Similar to the homophile movement’s positioning of homosexuality contra disability in the 1960s and 1970s, these safer-sex campaigns fixed the boundaries of homonormativity at the explicit disavowal of HIV, which threatened to confuse good and responsible homosexuals with the “queers, addicts, and sex workers out of control [who] would infect everyone.”⁴⁴ And even though more radical queer organizations, such as ACT UP, were vocal about the homophobia implicit in this disavowal, their retorts did more to exceptionalize AIDS as queerly stigmatizing than they did to disrupt the quotidian forms of ableism experienced by many people with disabilities.

For instance, in his vitriolic essay “1,112 and Counting” that helped to catalyze momentum for the fight against AIDS, Larry Kramer cautions that “if we don’t get angry” about AIDS, then “something worse will happen” than “the obvious losses” of life.⁴⁵ This something, it turns out, is the disability stigma produced when gays are “blamed for AIDS, for this epidemic.”⁴⁶ More horrifying to Kramer than the growing death toll was the idea that the gay community was “being called [AIDS] perpetrators, through our blood, through our ‘promiscuity,’ through just being the gay men so much of the rest of the world has learned to hate.”⁴⁷ I understand Kramer’s fear as ultimately about disability because his priority was not caring for people with AIDS or even preventing its further transmission but addressing the alleged shame of contagion, refusing the disgrace that accompanies AIDS. This is a disability stigma: when the infected is blamed for the infection. Indeed, it was Kramer’s anxiety over the threat of being disgraced that—in his mind—helped to transform AIDS into the “issue that has, ironically, united our community in a way not heretofore thought possible.”⁴⁸ Disability—or, rather, its threat—assisted in the production

of a queer counterdiscourse surrounding AIDS, a discourse premised on “generat[ing], visibly, numbers, masses”⁴⁹ that would later blossom into that mode of “anti-homophobic inquiry” called queer theory.⁵⁰ Not unlike how it was previously disowned to preserve homosexuality’s intelligibility apart from pathologization, disability was once again cast off to ensure the coherence of a queer constituency against the destructive force of AIDS. In both cases, disability functioned in the negative, generating forms of queer social life out of its constitutive absence. As Lisa Diedrich puts it, “Illness making queer as much as sexuality.”⁵¹

And herein lies the coming together of silence and disability. The compulsion for queer people to speak, to offer what Michel Foucault called “the truthful confession,” has long been rooted in the desire to extricate homosexuality from disability.⁵² First with regard to pathologization and then again in the context of AIDS, speech—as verbal, visual, material, or embodyminded presence—has repeatedly been used as a rhetorical tactic to safeguard normative homosexuality via its differentiation from sickness, mental illness, and disability more generally. Indeed, the “infinite task of telling” has been the central tool used to remap pathological homosexuals as rational gays and lesbians and, later, as disenfranchised queers.⁵³ This is the process, as Foucault tells us, of “transforming sex into discourse.”⁵⁴ Speech has characterized nondisabled queers as agents deserving of their autonomy from the medical-industrial complex and as subjects who were unfairly called “the cause of AIDS.”⁵⁵ To be clear, I am not arguing that gays should be beholden to a medical model of homosexuality or that AIDS was a legitimate mark of queer (ir)responsibility; instead, I am illuminating how the history of antihomophobic activism has relied on speech to claim liberal personhood in contradistinction to disability’s (and disabled people’s) objectifying silence.

Even within queer studies, wherein *queer* is invoked to shirk institutionalized forms of recognition, liberalism rears its head by claiming queer—through speech—as a political orientation. Despite its frequent citation as nonidentitarian and thus, allegedly, outside the strictures of liberalism, *queer*’s politics mandate its stability as a category that is made legible by way of speech. That is, *queer* has to be named in order to be recognized, and until an object is recognized as queer, it simply isn’t.

Judith Butler predicted this problem early in the field's history when they famously warned that "if the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation . . . it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage."⁵⁶ Butler knew that any articulation of *queer*—any speech act that identifies *queer* as queer—necessarily demands a degree of shared legibility that risks undermining the term's initial promise to "never be fully anticipated."⁵⁷ It would only be through "insurrectionary" uses of the term, those "without prior authorization," they argued, that *queer* would be able to retain its critical edge.⁵⁸ Over time, however, insurrection and unauthorization have taken on their own disciplinary lives, working against *queer*'s openness to the "radical democratic contestation" that once defined it.⁵⁹

Queer's institutionalization is perhaps the most pressing problem facing the utility of queer studies today. The field's instinct toward democratization is rubbing up against its own disciplinarity, leaving one to wonder whether *queer* still means (or has ever meant) what it was intended. As Kadji Amin argues, "queer mobility and indefiniteness function within Queer Studies as both a *disciplinary norm* and a *front*" that allege *queer*'s infinite malleability even as they make evident the field's situatedness within specific historical and cultural contexts.⁶⁰ These contexts are not only dominated by whiteness, settler logics, cissexism, and ableism but also hinged, as I argue, on the role of speech to secure a claim to civic life.⁶¹ By "civic," I am referring to the democratizing impulse inherent to any discourse, queer or otherwise, that mandates shared signs or modes of signification. This is the relational role of language: to create a community around a shared symbol system.⁶² Even if *queer* is "redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage," as Butler insists it must be, it can only be redeployed, twisted, and queered so far—to the extent that it remains decipherable to others. *Queer* is always already named *queer* as such and thus traffics in a liberal, colonial economy, wherein legibility begets autonomy begets self-determination. This variation of "queer liberalism," as coined by David L. Eng, valorizes a select few iterations of rhetorical action, such as speech, as "the mark of presence and inclusion" at the expense of other ways of being and doing that are rooted in silence.⁶³ Such enthymematic reasoning neglects the multiplicity of meanings

that speech might carry, including those that mark absence and exclusion. It also denies the queerness of objects and attachments that cannot be readily absorbed into queer studies' existing theoretical framework.

Queer's politicization relies on its uneven distribution, and it is in the process of distributing—of allowing some objects to become queer while dismissing others—that the field's inherent liberalism is exposed. That *queer* can be stratified, despite its allegedly unshakable commitment to the abject and marginal, suggests that queer studies underestimates the rhetorical effects of normativity, the ways that language is not only a product of power but also its producer. This is the performative work of *queer*: to append an object with queerness is to shape both the object and *queer* itself, delimiting the latter's "future linguistic life"—all other appendages as well as the scope within which they may dissent or reinvent *queer's* meaning within the jurisdiction of the field.⁶⁴ Surely, anyone can stamp queerness onto anything, but that does not, by itself, guarantee a thing is queer. There is the issue of legibility, as I said, which is ultimately an issue of respectability. Who has the power to wield *queer's* power?

This is a question I return to at length in the epilogue, but the answer has much to do with the critical difference between a marginalized politics and what we might call a politics of marginalization. Whereas the former refers to those people, practices, beliefs, and modes of being *on* the margins, the latter denotes the institutionalization *of* the margins. *Queer* is meant to signify the former—a place of abjection—but queer studies often takes shape as the latter, acclimatizing *queer* to fit the needs of academia's corporate interests in diversity. Heather Love anticipates my concern by accusing queer studies of "fail[ing] to acknowledge the distance queer scholars have climbed up the hierarchy of credibility."⁶⁵ This hierarchy refers to the liberalization of *queer* as it enters the academy, as it is thought and theorized, and as its nonnormative impulses are slowly but steadily domesticated in the service of a cohesive discourse. The process of domestication, I argue, is an effect of *queer's* speechification, its translation into an accessible register that can be conveniently politicized and aestheticized, offering queer scholars their "remarkable ability to combine insider cachet with outsider attitude."⁶⁶ Regardless of the

fact that queer studies opposes the tenets of liberalism in theory, the field's demand that *queer* be conversant shows that it shares liberalism's rhetorical mechanics.

These are mechanics that secure speech's political power by emptying silence of its own. Silence, unlike speech, cannot name *queer*. Silence cannot call itself or its practitioners *queer*. Silence is discreditable. Silence is absence, and absence is linked to incapacity or refusal and thus to disability or denial: to not speak *queer* because you can't or won't speak *queer*. Certainly, the relationship between silence and disability calls to mind literal disabilities that pertain to the production of speech, but it also emphasizes the figurative imbrication of these terms, what James Berger calls "dys-/disarticulation," which "describes the *problem* of how to imagine an outside to a social-symbolic order conceived as total and totalizing."⁶⁷ The rhyming of silence and disability depends on both reading disability as deficit (disarticulate) and disregarding the conditions that make speech accessible, let alone liberatory, for some people and not others (dysarticulate). The interplay here between silence and disability, what we might call "silence=disability," functions as a barometer by which *queer's* political effects are evaluated. As foregrounded above, queer speech marks progress and pride, whereas silence indicates madness or death. Within queer studies, this binary rubric serves as a structuring grammar for the field. It dictates that the queer subject, though not necessarily nondisabled, must nevertheless be spoken into existence in such a way that elides the dys-/disarticulate, the pathological, and thus the disabled conditions of *queer's* emergence.

Both silence and disability are rendered virtually unthinkable as objects of sustained queer critique because their absence is foundational to queer studies. How to observe the place of silence or disability in the field when *queer* is itself a spoken repudiation of disability? Where to locate silence in a field measured by speech? Where to find disability in a discourse generated by its invisibilization? Among the aims of this book is to reveal what is omitted or otherwise left unthought in queer studies when we forgo the field's historicity in the contexts of silence and disability. Even as I applaud queer studies' current investment in the contingency of *disability* and *queer*, this book inquires about the degree to which that contingency serves as

a theoretical substitution for the more daunting task of reconciling with the field's ongoing dispossession of *disability*. And more specifically, this book explores how that substitution continues to obfuscate or foreclose alternative ways of understanding the two categories' interanimation.

Queer silence is my final methodology, charged by the synergy between disability and rhetoric. By attending to contemporary implications of silence=disability, queer silence takes seriously the rhetorical role of *disability* in *queer*'s history, revealing variations of the *queer/disability* entanglement that exist outside the prevailing "political horizon" of queer studies.⁶⁸ Queer silence does not deny that queerness and disability are mutually reinforcing, but it does situate *queer/disability*'s present relationship within a genealogy of queer ableism that is predicated on the silencing of disability. Thus the work of queer silence is, in part, to make a crip intervention in the way disability—or, rather, its absence—structures queer studies. Queer silence reverses the original emphasis of McRuer's *Crip Theory* to hasten queer studies' "return to *old* locations, to shameful sites" that are resonant of the field's pathological origin: not *disability*'s queerness but *queer*'s disability.⁶⁹ I hope that such a return precipitates the crip reconciliation that queer studies desperately needs, one that joins recent calls for the field to face the history of its own institutionalization.⁷⁰ This is a history that in the ongoing process of disavowing disability implicitly fuses it to the infrastructure of the field.

My intentions with this book, though, move beyond the specific relationship between *queer* and *disability* to trace a range of silences as they are strategically performed by a variety of queer populations. I am not suggesting that queer silence is ever not about disability but rather that disability is internal to the methodology of queer silence. *Disability*, here, is like *queer* insofar as both are ways of thinking and knowing—at once irreducible to identity and yet molded by embodied experiences. As Merri Lisa Johnson and McRuer write, "disability knowledge—embodied and relational—is *about* disability . . . and extends *beyond* disability."⁷¹ Therefore, the interanimation of silence=disability not only reveals *disability*'s centrality to homosexuality and other minoritized sexual and gender configurations but also exposes the generative capacity of silence to illuminate a broader array

of meaning-making forms that are typically dismissed or ignored by queer studies. Indeed, if we can establish *disability* as the bedrock of *queer*, might we not also identify silence as the origin of speech, the wellspring of signification? Rather than reducing silence to the inversion of speech, can we not envision a model that recognizes speech as silence's progeny? Might the queerness of silence lie in its potential to resist its own erasure? To all of these questions, I answer with a resounding *yes*: silence is what makes *queer's* disability speak.

Reclaiming Silence

My approach to silence in this book is informed by a number of conversations in feminist theory and Black feminism, disability studies, and rhetorical studies that address both literal, aural silences and figurative, metaphoric ones. This range of perspectives not only highlights the raced, disabled, gendered, and sexualized dimensions of silence but also cleaves the concept away from any single disciplinary framework, offering an elastic model that remains adaptable to different contexts. Sometimes I discuss silence in its traditional, verbal form, but I also acknowledge other silences across the sensorium, like visual silences, haptic silences, and embodied silences. For me, *silence* refers simply to the space of rhetorical absence. Given the long-standing prioritization of speech over silence in queer studies and in Western culture more generally, I am drawn to silence's subversive potential, even and perhaps especially when deployed as a metaphor, to throw into relief the range of meaning-making modalities that fill our world. Silence is not merely absence; it's meaningful absence.

Admittedly, this definition exists in stark contrast with how *silence* is usually defined alongside or in opposition to speech. In *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe admit that within "the Western tradition, reiterated from Aristotle to Audre Lorde, . . . silence [is] a site of reform and . . . voice [is] the ultimate goal of and means to achieve empowerment."⁷² For marginalized people, this prevailing dichotomy purports speech as the only possible route to agency. People are expected to speak up and speak out to signal their subjectivity or membership to a community, regardless of the consequences they may face for doing

so or of the fact that not everyone uses verbal speech to communicate. In the first case, speaking entails a degree of vulnerability that some marginalized folks cannot afford. Coming out, for instance, continues to be risky and often dangerous for many queer and trans people, and doing it on a whim isn't always possible. In the second case, speech has never been humans' only form of communication. Despite the "audiological perspective," as described by Brenda Brueggemann, that "imagin[es] the human world only and always in terms of sound," there are in fact many ways to engage with people that rely on other sensoria, such as with sign languages and facilitated communication.⁷³ The correlation of speech with power is antithetical to the embodied and material conditions that constitute many people's lives, and it does less to support and uplift marginalized populations than it does to enforce colonialist and ableist norms that demand the individualization of a person beholden to a particular group identity prior to recognizing them as fully human.⁷⁴

It is for this reason that Wendy Brown argues that speaking up and speaking out can sometimes edge into virtue signaling, where the occurrence of a speech act matters more than the repercussions from it.⁷⁵ "The work of breaking silence can metamorphose into new techniques of domination," she writes. "Our confessions become the norms by which we are regulated."⁷⁶ Echoing Foucault, Brown worries that confessional speech acts—such as when Kameny claims a homosexual identity before decrying its inclusion in the *DSM*—evidence not pure liberation but a chimera entwined with surveillance. To come out as a marginalized subject is to accept, at least in part, the categorical terms proffered by an institution. While both Foucault and Brown admit that a degree of confession is necessary to build community around a social identity, Brown problematizes the extent to which "breaking silence" is compulsory for marginalized people. She asks, "amidst this cacophony of expression, confession, coming out, claiming a voice and telling all, where in this cult of the personal . . . can a political space be claimed to break a political silence?"⁷⁷ That a silence might be political is itself noteworthy, a departure from the outstanding assumption that all silences are either enforced or complicit with enforcing the silence of others. And to insist on "a political space" for silence, even if it is eventually broken, is to suggest an ethics of silence; it's to

acknowledge there may be reasons beyond fear, weakness, or capitulation that a person would choose to be silent. “It would seem,” Brown proposes, “that our capacity to be silent in certain venues might be a measure of our desire for freedom.”⁷⁸ Such a desire is precisely what calls queer silence into being. Though no silence (or speech act) is ever entirely willed into existence independently of the material-discursive forces that constitute both a subject and their positionality, queer silence clings to the potential that absence can do work.

The work of absence signals the capacity—however partial and mediated—of queer silence to reject the compulsion to confess. This rejection extends not only to speech but also to other forms of mandated signification, such as visibility. Similar to the dichotomy between speech and silence, the bifurcation of visibility and invisibility presumes the supremacy of visual presence over the alleged oppressiveness of invisible absence. Jenell Johnson and Krista Kennedy write that “visibility, rhetorical agency, and political action are understood as tightly interlinked,” despite the fact that visibility can sometimes “lead to surveillance, doxing, deportation, firing, and even violence or death.”⁷⁹ Again like the unmitigated celebration of speech, visibility is touted as unilaterally beneficial to marginalized populations, even though the lived experience of being visible can be less than liberating. By attending to the potentialities of rhetorical absence, including invisibility and silence (among other absent sensoria), I am holding space for a variation of what Johnson elsewhere calls “dispublicity,” where absence might be understood “not as a personal failing but as a result of the complex meeting of bodyminds and material/discursive environments.”⁸⁰ This is a coming together of people and their conditions that puts pressure on how terms like *activism*, *advocacy*, and *politics* are typically envisioned. It is a reconciliation that exposes “entirely new ways of being together” and wholly alternative paths to making meaning.⁸¹ The work of absence, in the end, is the work of invention.

In classical rhetoric, invention is the first of five canons, followed by arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. To invent, rhetorically speaking, is to take stock “in any given case the available means of persuasion,” so that a rhetor might assemble an effective speech.⁸² Feminist rhetoricians have picked up on the inventive work of absence, noting that “the available means of persuasion” sometimes do not

include speech or visibility, particularly for folks whose race, gender, sexuality, or disability make conventional forms of rhetorical action inaccessible.⁸³ Absence thus becomes a rhetorical strategy, a way of making meaning when the conditions would otherwise render it impossible. Writing specifically about verbal silence, Cheryl Glenn assures that it “is meaningful, even if it is invisible.”⁸⁴ Despite the fact that the silences of any marginalized group “often goes unremarked upon if noticed at all,” there is a potentiality inherent to silence that does not depend on recognition to effect material change.⁸⁵ In Glenn’s words, “Neither speech nor silence is more successful, communicative, informative, revealing, or concealing than the other. Rhetorical success depends upon the rhetorical situation.”⁸⁶ The shift in emphasis here from the signifying mode (speech versus silence) to the rhetorical situation (meaning-making context) recalls why rhetoric is relevant to the project of queer silence: the signifying potential of absence does not come to mean on its own but is activated by the commingling of a rhetor and their conditions. Queer silence is a relational project.

By “relational,” I mean that no individual rhetorical situation can be separated out—materially, geographically, or temporally—from the collective rhetorical situation that is the evolution of meaning itself. Jenny Rice refers to this relational rhetoricity in terms of “ecologies,” where the “the elements of [a] rhetorical situation simply bleed.”⁸⁷ While rhetorical scholars will sometimes isolate instances of rhetorical exchange for the purpose of analysis, it is nevertheless the case that “bodies carry with them the traces of effects from whole fields of culture and social histories.”⁸⁸ Rhetorical ecologies thus expand the focus of rhetorical studies to include not only frame-by-frame interactions but also more robustly contextualized discursive flows. “An ecological, or *affective*, rhetorical model,” Rice writes, “is one that reads rhetoric both as a process of distributed emergence and as an ongoing circulation process.”⁸⁹ Meaning is produced in a cycle of exchange where the roles of rhetor and audience are dynamic, in flux, and responsive to their environment. As it pertains to absence, Rice’s ecological rhetoric sheds light on how neither silence nor invisibility can be tacitly linked to voicelessness because it is only in situ that either can come to mean at all. Absence, like presence, is contingent.

Consider, for instance, the anecdote with which I open this

chapter about an appointment I had with my conversion therapist, Joe. In our exchange, there are moments of speech and silence, presence and absence, all of which mean something. Regarding my speech, a reader can track my confession: “I’m a man.” Joe elicits from me an admission of my designated category, an identity that is intended to smooth over any disjunctures among my sex assigned at birth, gender, and sexual orientation. Joe’s intention here is to produce a discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, that muddies the boundary between my material self and my culturally constituted, rhetorical significations. Joe “trace[s] the meeting line of [my] body and [my] soul, following all its meanderings.”⁹⁰ To be “a man,” for Joe, means to be a cis, heterosexual man, and my confession is meant to be the first step toward self-actualizing as such. However, when I am not speaking, not confessing, I am still signifying. My silence during Joe’s speech—when he pokes my chest, when he grabs my shoulders—means something too. I argue that my verbal silence in those moments intensifies my embodied and material significations: my legs crossed at the knee, my quickened breath, my soft wrists, my growing erection. These physical states take on meaning in that room as they undermine what I articulate verbally, speaking back to Joe’s cisheterosexism. While my confessional speech act is certainly part of the rhetorical situation, a broader framework reveals my silence as a gesture toward alternative signifiers that also help constitute the rhetorical ecology.

These alternative signifiers can be mapped by what I call the *rhetorical matrix*, which positions silence—as rhetorical absence—at the center of all meaning making. Once again, *silence* in this framework may refer to a lack of speech, but it could also refer to any absent form of signification (haptic, material, visual, etc.). By defining *silence* broadly, I emphasize the virtual impossibility of arhetoricity. If a thing exists—in the sense that it has taken on an ontological quality, distinguishing it from pure matter—the rhetorical matrix assures that it must mean something in some way. For even if an object is verbally silent, it nevertheless possesses embodied, material, visual, or affective dimensions that also hold the potential to signify. Returning to my experience in conversion therapy, the rhetorical matrix urges any reading of my verbal silence with Joe to be done in tandem with readings of how else I was signifying. My breath, wrists, and dick all

also carried signs; they too were meaningful and were made all the more so through my verbal silence. Absence and presence must be considered multimodally, so silence in one mode amplifies the rhetorical presence in others. My verbal silence turned up the volume on my signifying body. Silence within the rhetorical matrix shifts the position of absence from meaning's total negation to its original referent.

Admittedly, the embodied significations I identify above—my limp wrist, for instance—were not intentional. I did not necessarily will them into being. Yet, borrowing from Rice, we can understand my bodymind as participating in a larger ecology of meaning making where my limp wrist comes to mean irrespective of whether or how I intend it. My wrist is a product of my *rhetorical energy*, which is the phrase I use to describe the constellation of signifiers and significations that inform how an object comes to mean. While other scholars in rhetoric have likened rhetoric to energy, noting their parallel forms of sporadic movement,⁹¹ my use of the phrase makes a dramatic departure from how it is customarily understood within the field. My invocation emphasizes the gap between how a person wants something to signify and how it actually does signify to those on the receiving end of the signification(s). Just as sometimes what we mean to say is not what comes out, or how we mean to sound is not how we are heard, so too do any of our significations exist only partially within our control. The meanings associated with my queerness, transness, and disabilities, for example, all contribute to a rhetorical energy that radiates from me. It's a composition of affective discourses that I do not entirely choose but that nevertheless contribute to how I am seen, heard, and understood by others.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how queer people use silence to harness and wield their rhetorical energy. Racialized, gender nonconforming, and disabled populations, as well as those who experience other or multiple forms of subjection, are all layered in meaning that signals their embodyminded departure from a normativity structured by white cisheteroableism. Their rhetorical energy thus speaks for them, regardless of whether they're talking, regardless of whether they intend to mean at all. In the example I offer, I frame my bodymind as a form of resistance to Joe's cisheterosexism, but it is also the case that the embodyminded rhetorical features I celebrate

(my crossed legs, soft wrists, hard cock) are the same features that brought me into the precarious space of conversion therapy in the first place. Rhetorical energy is, then, something that spills out of a person not because they want it to but because they exist in a cultural context wherein their bodyminds have taken on what Debra Hawhee describes as a “vivid, weighty, kinetic presence,” a discursive heft.⁹²

The rhetorical matrix, centering silence as it does, tracks the contours of rhetorical energy’s fluctuating intensity and motion across signifying modalities. As Joe and I both oscillate between forms of signification and silence—speech, touch, movement, etc.—the rhetorical matrix charts our interactions as collisions of rhetorical energies. It interprets our modulating significations as the effect of multiple discourses in tension with one another: affective intensities playing out as verbal, visual, and haptic meaning. While Joe and I are consciously engaging each other, rhetorical energy exists well beyond our intentions, and the rhetorical matrix works to capture its unpredictable movement. Queer silence, drawing together the rhetorical matrix and rhetorical energy, recuperates my stutters and whimpers not as mere compliance, and thus the extent of my rhetorical action, but as absences of verbal speech gesturing toward other action, toward the indefatigable resilience of queerness itself.

I recognize that the intervention I am making with queer silence may to some feel like splitting hairs. What, after all, is so impressive or resistant or political about a boy boning up to a man who’s yelling at him? “It sounds like,” a friend told me after reading an early draft of this introduction, “you just feel bad about not speaking up when you had the chance, like you’re looking for a way to excuse the fact that you didn’t act.” At the risk of seeming pedantic, I’d like to trouble the assumption that queers who are impressive, resistant, or political are the only ones worth thinking about, especially when all these terms are so frequently bound up with forms of speech and visibility that make already marginalized persons more vulnerable. By linking queer silence to a politics, or by noting its potential to be deployed as a form of resistance, I am working to open up the grammar of activism to include the everyday work that some of us do to survive. In Black feminism, this is the work of refusal, of rejecting the face value of your rhetorical energy. Tina Campt writes that “practicing

refusal” is “a quotidian practice of refusing the terms of impossibility that define the black subject in the twenty-first-century logic of racial subordination.”⁹³ The “terms of impossibility” refer to the significations layered onto Black people that make life unlivable, and the “practice of refusing” gestures to the role of silence, to the ways of making meaning outside the ones already prescribed. “Refusing the impossibility of black futurity in the contemporary moment demands extremely creative forms of fugitivity,” says Camp. “It is as brave an act as looking into the eyes of police officers surrounding you, seeing the certainty of a lifetime of incarceration, and deciding to create an alternate future (‘line of flight’) than the one they have in store.”⁹⁴ As one might imagine, deciding to create an alternate future is not as easy as building one; likewise, the power of queer silence lies not in its guarantees but in its potentialities, its maybes. Reading queer silence alongside practices of refusal emphasizes not only the racialization of silence—the ways people of color and Black people in particular are disproportionately silenced and at risk of violence for speaking—but also the queerness of refusal, the fact that saying *no* or nothing at all is often unthinkable.

And yet, queer silence’s unthinkability is perhaps what renders it such an effective mode of resistance. It not only rejects conventional signs and signifiers but also destabilizes the very subject position needed for those signs and signifiers to emerge.⁹⁵ Queer silence severs the ties between agency and traditional, speech-based forms of activism, echoing Diane Davis’s claim that agency is but a “fragile link between rhetorical practice and civic responsibility.”⁹⁶ Despite rhetoric’s long history as an ethical alternative to violence (making speeches is better than going to war, or something like that), Davis argues in *In-essential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations* that the implicit connection between rhetoric and civic duty overdetermines agency as the precondition for human existence. A more accurate understanding of agency, for her, positions it as the effect of a person’s relationality: it’s through our solidarity that we grow an agential capacity. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, Davis argues that a “responsibility to respond,” or our need to recognize another subject as a subject, is what triggers our own subjectification, “rather than the other way around.”⁹⁷ A person must be relational before they can be considered

agential. The fact that a person is in relation, and thus responsible for someone else, makes them into subjects in the first place. “This underivable obligation to respond that is the condition for any ethical action whatsoever,” she writes, “amounts to a preoriginary *rhetorical imperative*.”⁹⁸ This preoriginary rhetoricity is “the condition for symbolic action” because before a person can intentionally signify, before they can claim the agency necessary to make meaning, they first must locate themselves within a social context.⁹⁹ Agency is little more than an elaboration of the theory of mind. It is an acknowledgment that one is not the only one, that I am not the only I.

This book builds on Davis’s thesis to propose rhetorical energy as a corrective to the idea that agency can only be evidenced by a select few rhetorical modes and modalities (e.g., speech, visibility, etc.). While Davis’s preoriginary rhetoricity describes the agency of a given subject in relation, rhetorical energy is akin to a preoriginary rhetoric, contextualizing the stuff of signification prior to its condensation into legible meaning. This suggests that signs, too, only signify in relation. Davis writes, “agency is always already for-the-other: it is not spontaneous or self-determined or heroic but thoroughly rhetorical, responsive, assigned.”¹⁰⁰ Rhetorical energy is likewise assigned, operating as an underlying or preoriginary force behind signification. The flow of discourses through my body not only affect how others read me but also constitute me as having a bodymind to be read. Rhetorical energy is the stuff of culture as it swarms around my living matter, instantiating me as a signifying subject.¹⁰¹ Rhetorical energy is my essence before it is mine.

Situating Silence

In the chapters that follow, queer silence comes alive as the animation of rhetorical energy across the rhetorical matrix. To make silence do work, queer people mobilize their unchosen energy toward acts of resistance, toward ways of surviving and sometimes thriving in spite of the precarious positions, rhetorical and otherwise, that they inhabit. Silence=disability comes into play as a haunting reminder of silence’s inherent queerness, of the ways that disability was jettisoned to make room for, first, “homosexuality” and, shortly thereafter, “queer” to

emerge as respectable, legible categories. The queerness of silence is thus not an exclusively sexual queerness but a cripp one, a mad one, a disabled one that calls attention to the bodyminds living, dying, speaking, and silencing outside the narrow margins of homonormativity.

To begin, the first chapter, “To Speak of Silence,” grounds this book with a series of genealogies for its central concepts: queer silence, rhetorical energy, and the rhetorical matrix. Given their interdisciplinarity, chapters 2 through 5 require something of a glossary that provides a shared vocabulary for queer studies, disability studies, and rhetorical studies readerships. Chapter 1 offers just this: a “queer methodology” culled together from multiple fields and critical conversations that “attempts to remain supple enough” to suss out queer silence’s roaming and sometimes random appearances.¹⁰² Additionally, chapter 1 addresses the intimacy between rhetorical energy and affect. Though rhetorical energy is affective, I argue through disability studies, mad studies, and queer of color critiques that it is irreducible to affect, at once too deeply embodyminded and too ephemeral. This chapter foreshadows how the remainder of the book will take up rhetorical energy and the rhetorical matrix as guiding heuristics to explain some of the ways queer silence is engaged and deployed.

Chapters 2 through 5 each offer a case study of queer silence, but more importantly, each nuances what silence can be and do. These chapters are not only examples but also building blocks that, when read together, scaffold a more comprehensive picture of silence’s queer potentialities. The first of these chapters, “White Squares to Black Boxes,” tracks silence as it calls forth other modalities of absence and presence beyond the verbal register. Attending to the work of “blank profiles” on Grindr, a dating app for queer and trans people, I show how rhetorical energy operates through visual and digital media. On the app, users have the option to upload profile pictures that make themselves visible to others, but many racialized, trans, and disabled users choose not to do so, resulting in blank profiles or profiles without identifiable users. I refer to this phenomenon as visual silence, where users attempt to regulate the rhetorical energy of their bodies by making themselves literally invisible. I also introduce rhetorical quieting as a way to illuminate how even invisible queer bodyminds cannot be dequeered. Instead, I argue that blank profiles

speak to the resilience of queer materiality, acting as portals through the app and into “real” life.

“Queer(crip) Masquerading,” the third chapter, introduces silence to the realm of identity, exposing how a stable notion of queer politics belies the itinerancy and unpredictability of queerness itself. Specifically, I delve into the world of ex-gays—a term adopted by some participants in conversion therapy—who manipulate their rhetorical energy so that their homoerotic desire might be read as a disability. Rather than “praying the gay away,” as it is commonly joked about online, ex-gays are encouraged to pathologize themselves as mentally disabled by rehearsing antiquated theories of psychotherapy to elicit the pity generated by disability’s rhetorical power within evangelical Christianity. While there is no question that the ex-gay cooptation of disability is troubling for its implicit heterosexism and dependence on medical and moral models of disability—wherein disability is subordinated to the purview of medical and religious establishments—it nevertheless showcases the queer potentiality of silence, its capacity to reshape itself to work within the constraints of a given context. Silence sustains the queerness of ex-gays, harnessing the malleable properties of absence, a queer resistance to its own eradication.

The malleability of absence appears again in the fourth chapter, “Disidentifying Silence,” where I explore the temporality of silence and how trans elders, in particular, latch onto it as a way of navigating their transitions. Rooting my argument in Jess T. Dugan and Vanessa Fabbre’s photoethnographic project *To Survive on This Shore*, I merge trans studies, trans of color critique, and critical age studies to unveil how popular representations of trans life rely on biological and deterministic models of gender that are often at odds with elder trans folks’ experiences. Despite the importance of respecting trans people and the field of trans studies as distinct from queer folks and queer studies, I contend that the marginalization of trans elders within mainstream trans discourse renders them queer. Trans elders often tell stories of transition that are neither linear nor particularly predictable, and these narratives exist in stark contrast to what I call the transnatural model, which frames gender identity as a static characteristic that is inherent to all people. I propose *trans silence* as a way of naming gender variance that exceeds or resists transnormative

temporalities. Trans silence exposes not only the deep-seated ageism that structures transnormativity but also the racism and ableism that is inherent to transnaturalism, thereby obfuscating the trajectories of trans of color and disabled trans people's transitions. This chapter ends with a series of speculations on the nexus of trans studies and disability studies, where silence=disability serves as a helpful guide for addressing ongoing conflicts between the fields.

The fifth chapter, "Neuroqueer Intimacies," takes up the purchase of queer silence for cross-movement work. By bringing together Jennifer C. Nash's model of "intimacy" and M. Remi Yergeau's discussion of "neuroqueer," I propose that the collectivities enabled by queer silence are at once avowedly intersectional and acutely suspicious of identity's role in coalitional projects. The indispensability of identity to community formation notwithstanding, queer silence charts alternative routes to world-building that rely less heavily on knowing who you are and more on how you want to live. This chapter offers up three examples of disability performance art, including fashion shows by the Radical Visibility Collective, the ramp-based choreography in DESCENT by Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson with Kinetic Light, and an aerobic performance by Rodney Bell for Sins Invalid, each of which showcases the kind of neuroqueer intimacies afforded by queer silence. These intimacies, though brimming with radical, rhetorical potential, don't always change the world. They don't always look or feel like activism, resistance, or defiance. They aren't always very noisy or even visible. But these intimacies, grounded in a reclamation of silence, plumb absence for its impulse to the otherwise, its tendency toward something new, different, better, and disabled. Neuroqueer intimacies are what happens when we embrace silence as a mode of collective liberation.

In lieu of a summative conclusion, I end the book with an epilogue entitled "Shameful Disattachments and Queer Illegibility" that brings full circle the narrative about my experience in conversion therapy. This time, however, I appear not in a clinical setting but in the sanctuary of a church, where I attempted to kill myself shortly after finishing my treatment. Rather than try to reclaim my suicide attempt or the shame that drove me to it as examples of queer silence, I frame them as exigencies to consider what silence might tell us about

the field of queer studies. Despite the fact that the field touts shame among its affective ideals, I show how queer shame's liberatory potential depends on the exclusion of pathological shame, such as my own. Building on Amin's notion of an "attachment genealogy," which seeks to "deidealize" queer studies' prized objects, I propose a disattachment genealogy to reveal how my suicidal shame, as well as *queer's* other disavowals, have worked to produce and sustain the field's existing attachments.¹⁰³ In addition to expanding the scope of queer studies to pursue new affects and objects, it is also worth attending to those that were necessarily discarded in an effort to politicize *queer* in the 1990s and to preserve its coherence for queer studies. Refurbishing and re-capacitating *queer's* prior disavowals may indeed pose challenges to queer studies' methodological consistency, but I suggest that there is value in sacrificing *queer's* legibility—in admitting that we don't always understand why a thing is queer. Perhaps by opening *queer* up to its own silences, we can begin listening to the people, positionalities, and politics that have until now been forcibly absented.